

Afghan Religion in US Army Pre-Deployment Schooling

And the Meeting between US Soldiers and Afghans in War

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This thesis is dedicated to the young victims of the terrorist attacks in Norway 7/22/2011, who wanted to study and get a degree, but who never got the chance to do so.

He who knows only one side of a thing, knows little of that.

- *African Proverb*

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1 Introduction

1.1 Presentation of my topic

“Operation Infinite Justice”. This was the first term used to denote the war in Afghanistan. The term must have sounded good for the American administration that chose it, but the sound of it did not ring as well in the ears of many Afghan Muslims. In Islam, God has many names, 99 of which are known to man. One of these names is an Arabic word, *الـ باقـي*, that translates to “infinite” in English. To use one of God’s names to denote the war in Afghanistan was by many Muslims perceived as wrong, since infinity belongs to God and only he is master of it. I guess you can say that for many Muslims, this sounded like a name that sought to put Americans in God’s place. “Infinite justice” is not something that humans can create; this matter is solely in God’s hands.

Now the name has been changed, and the war in Afghanistan is known as Operation Enduring Freedom. This name is more acceptable for Muslims, as it does not offend or misuse their God’s name.¹

This example tells us a lot about the importance of religious literacy, which is a concept I will be coming back to several times in this thesis.

My quest with this project is to find out how the US Army prepares its soldiers for the meeting with Afghan religion, which is present on every level in Afghanistan; from the family and up to the government. I believe that the best source of information about this topic is the veterans who have served in Afghanistan. Only they can reveal how their pre-deployment schooling really did prepare them.

So my two main questions are these:

1. According to US Army veterans who have served in Afghanistan, how is religion emphasized in the US Army pre-deployment schooling?
2. According to US Army veterans, how did the Army schooling prepare them for the challenges they met when interacting with the Afghan people? What do they now think about the Afghans and their religion?

¹ “Infinite Justice, Out – Enduring Freedom, In”, *BBC News*, 2001.

1.2 Background and motivation for choosing this topic

Religion is of such great importance for so many people, both in the US and in Afghanistan. Even though you can find both Christians and Muslims in the two countries, USA is predominantly Christian, while Afghanistan is predominantly a Muslim country. History shows us all too many examples of adherents to the two religious traditions not getting along. Christians do not always understand Muslims, and vice versa. If you add to that the way the cultures in these two countries are radically different, and that they speak different languages, it is not hard to see why people from one country can get a culture shock from visiting the other. Even an American Muslim going to visit Muslims in Afghanistan would probably have difficulties understanding the Afghan mindset and their ways of practicing Islam.

At this time of writing, June 2011, there are about 100.000 US troops stationed in Afghanistan². To lead a peacemaking process in a radically different culture, with people speaking another language and practicing religion in a dissimilar way, the ideal situation would be that all the US soldiers in Afghanistan were cultural, religious and linguistic experts. I somehow doubt that all the soldiers in Afghanistan are just that. Because who are the soldiers? According to the Army's website, they are people between the age of 17 and 42, mostly men, and the only educational requirement for enlisting is a High School Diploma. In some cases, the Army will consider letting you join even if you do not have a High School Diploma³.

I have lived in the US for two years now, and everyone here tells me it is not common for Americans to speak a second language fluently, with the exception of residents who have immigrated and learned English fluently, like a significant number of Latin-Americans. Many Americans have never been outside the borders of the US⁴, and those who have, usually have not spent their vacations in Afghanistan. Most US citizens have not been taught about religions either, since public schools in the US do not teach about religions. What they know about their own religion is usually what they have learned in church, and the knowledge they possess about other religions usually comes from the media. So I think it is reasonable to assume that most of the US soldiers in Afghanistan did not have first-hand experience with Afghan religion before

² "Ambassadorial Nominee Warns of Risk if the U.S. Abandons Afghanistan", *NY Times*, 2011.

³ "Can I join the US Army?", *Army.com*, 2011

⁴ In fact, only about 37% of the population has a passport. ("Passport Statistics", *US Department of State*, 2011.)

going there, and that they do not hold the linguistic capabilities of communicating in one of the many Afghan languages.

Some Americans join the Army in order to get an education because they could not afford it otherwise. The Army provides a Tuition Assistance Program that makes education more affordable. So we can further assume that many US soldiers do not hold a degree from higher education. What do they know about Afghanistan? About Islam?

The war in Afghanistan is essentially a war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, not all of the Afghan people, and the soldiers depend on the cooperation with locals if they shall ever have a chance to see peace in the country. How prepared are the US soldiers to take on such a challenge?

One of my reasons for wanting to do research on this topic, is all the questions that arose after my first encounter with a US Army veteran. He had served in the Vietnam War, and while listening to him speak about the challenges he faced as a soldier in Vietnam when he was young, I wondered how well equipped he was to tackle the culture shock that Vietnam must have given him. The competence that enables you to interact with people of a different nationality and with a religion unlike your own has to be developed over time, and you have to adapt to succeed. It is impossible to be prepared for everything you will encounter in a different culture, but some preparation and knowledge about the people you are going to meet, can help the process of adaptation go smoother.

I was curious as to what kind of preparation the Vietnam veteran had gone through before deployment, so I asked him about this. How much did he know about Vietnam, the people, their language, culture and religion before going? He replied: “Well, I knew that Vietnam was a country in Asia somewhere. That’s just about all I knew before going there.” So this man’s story made me want to find out more about how the situation is for US soldiers going to war now. I chose to find out more about the preparation the soldiers going to Afghanistan receive, since the war in Afghanistan is still very much current affairs, and it is clearly a war where the soldiers are depending on being able to interact with the locals.

1.3 State of the art

To my knowledge, no one has written a thesis with this exact research question. There are many books written on the war in Afghanistan, on the Taliban, the Al Qaeda, religious literacy in the US, and the US Military.

I started looking through my own books, finding that many of them speak about Islam, intercultural and interreligious communication, psychology and war. I then needed more material on the US, American religion, religious literacy, the US Military, Afghanistan, the Taliban and this specific war. I also had to read up on methodology and the qualitative method.

I have read material from different disciplines. I started out reading history so that I would know more about what happened and when, next I brushed up on my knowledge of religions, especially Islam, and tried to put this knowledge into the context of Afghanistan and the US. I have read military literature, which has been important since I did not hold any competence when it comes to military matters before I started writing. Books and articles in the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology have been very informative for my research question. My literature has mostly consisted of material in the discipline of sociology, or the sociology of religion.

Some of this material I found in books at my local Barnes and Noble bookstore, some at the library, some I ordered online and some was accessible for free online, much of which was found through scholar.google.com. I have also watched documentaries concerning the war in Afghanistan, American soldiers and the Taliban to get a better understanding of the conflict.

However, to find the answers to my research questions concerning the US soldiers' schooling on religion and society in Afghanistan, I had to create my own material in addition to the sources listed above. There has, of course, been written countless articles and books on the topic of religious and cultural differences and interreligious communication, especially between Christians and Muslims, but I have found none with this *exact* context, none that talks about the schooling of the US soldiers and the relationship between them and Afghans in the kind of setting that the war provides.

1.4 On the shoulders of giants... but still on my own

I have tried my best to get an understanding of how the situation is for the US soldiers, and try to map the human terrain in Afghanistan, and I have learned a lot both from my written and visual sources and the informants presented in this thesis. I am glad to have been able to expand my knowledge by learning from them, and I hope I will be able to present their work and opinions in a good and enlightening way. Still, everything goes by me and becomes “my own” in this process. I will inevitably interpret all my sources and my informants’ stories. All the material is presented in a new context, it becomes *recontextualized*.

In this process of recontextualization, I am aiming to present my findings in a way that can make this thesis accessible to a broader audience. It has to follow a certain standard set by the faculty and meet certain academic criterions, but I hope to make my thesis interesting and readable for others than the professors at the Theological Faculty in Oslo. People connected to the US Military and the Norwegian Military, my family, friends and most importantly my informants have expressed an interest in reading about my findings, and I will try to write in a way that they could find interesting as well.

1.5 The thesis’ structure

In the following chapter, I will provide a theoretical framework for the material I gathered with my fieldwork. This will be a chapter containing information about religion in the US and Afghanistan, where I will highlight certain areas where I believe Americans and Afghans could encounter challenges understanding each other.

The next chapter will contain information on the method I chose to employ to find answers for my research question. I will give a description of the process this thesis has gone through and describe my role as a researcher. I will only be able to present partial perspectives and not an objective truth.

Then, I will present my findings. Here you can read excerpts from the interviews I have conducted with four US Army veterans and get their take on the topic of pre-deployment

schooling in Afghan religion and how the schooling prepared them for the challenges they faced in the war.

The last chapter will sum up the whole thesis from beginning to end, and include my concluding remarks.

2. Religion in Afghanistan and the USA

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will give a short introduction to the importance of religion in the US and Afghanistan. In the following, I will describe the cultural differences of practicing religion and how religion and politics are connected in the two countries. Islam is present at all levels in Afghanistan, from government politics down to the family level. American forces have to deal with all of these levels in the war. I will try to show why people from the two nations can have difficulties understanding each other by highlighting some areas where US and Afghan practices differ significantly. My emphasis will be on religion in Afghanistan, and how the Taliban has made use of Islam to their advantage, but I will also include a part about religion and religious literacy in the US. Everyone is formed by the culture they grow up in, and we see the world differently. The culture shock experienced by an American soldier might be unlike the shock a soldier from a Muslim country, or even a Western European country, could experience. Therefore, it is important to look at the American context as well.

I will not provide a thorough account of Afghanistan's military history with the Soviets, the Civil War, the Mujahideen and all that, I will rather give a description of the areas where US soldiers and the Afghan population are likely to encounter problems understanding each other in the conflict of today. All the areas here presented cannot be treated in great length and detail; one would need many books to cover them. Still, I wanted to include them to show what an immensely complex human terrain the US soldiers will have to navigate.

2.2 Religion and culture

Some clarification and definitions are needed before we proceed. My research questions concern the pre-deployment schooling of American soldiers going to Afghanistan when it comes to Afghan religion, and how US veterans would describe their relations with Afghans.

By Afghan religion, I am of course referring to Islam. Nearly all Afghans are Muslims. Around 80% are Sunni Muslims, 19% are Shiites, and it is estimated that the remaining 1%

consist of Ismailis, Hindus and Sikhs. Several thousand Jews used to live in Afghanistan, but the Sovjet invasion, the civil war and the Taliban rule forced practically all of them to leave the country.⁵

The American soldiers' education on Islam, or lack thereof, will be the main focus when it comes to religion in this thesis. What I want to find out, is how the soldiers are prepared to understand local religious customs and traditions that are deeply embedded into the Afghans' culture, whether they are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras or belong to another ethnic group.

When it comes to defining religion, there is a great discussion among scholars as to which definition one should employ, and whether or not it is possible or justifiable to employ any definition. Max Weber famously refused to provide a definition to religion, claiming that such a conceptualization can only come from particular social-scientific analysis.⁶ Another scholar, James Leuba, published a list of more than four dozen definitions of religion where none of them seemed to agree.⁷ Some scholars even claim that we should not use the term "religion" at all, since it is basically a Western term coined by scholars so that the scholars could discuss religion. Many languages do not even have a word for "religion". I will not enter into a lengthy discussion about different definitions of religion here, I will only state the definition I employ in this thesis, which is a stipulative one. Stipulative definitions of religion "cannot be true or false; they can only be more or less useful."⁸ William James decided on this approach when he was going to present his Gifford lectures:

The field of religion being as wide as this, it is manifestly impossible that I should pretend to cover it. My lectures must be limited to a fraction of the subject. And, although it would indeed be foolish to set up an abstract definition of religion's essence, and then proceed to defend that definition against all comers, yet this need not prevent me from taking my own narrow view of what religion shall consist in *for the purposes of these lectures*, or out of the many meanings of the word, from choosing the one meaning in which I wish to interest you particularly, and proclaiming arbitrarily that when I say "religion" I mean *that*.⁹

⁵ Wahab and Youngerman 2010:19

⁶ Beyer 2003:142

⁷ Tweed 2005:253

⁸ *ibid*:257

⁹ James, William 1902, in Tweed 2005:258

In this thesis, I am talking about religion as something that binds people together and keeps people apart. It is a belief system that, if not respected by people outside of it and treated the right way, can create almost insurmountable barriers between peoples. It can also work as a motivator to fight. Islam in Afghanistan and Christianity in America are different from Islam and Christianity practiced in other countries. This is where culture comes in.

It is very hard, some will say impossible, to distinguish religion from culture. A good example in this discussion is the example of the hijab, the veil that many Muslim women use. Some claim that the prescription to use the veil is prescribed by God himself, and make wearing the hijab a religious duty for Muslim women. Others say that this is a question about culture, and that Islam does not oblige women to wear anything. They claim that this “obligation” is manmade, and as such it is a cultural obligation, not a religious one.

All religions and religious practices are influenced by the culture they are expressed in. At the same time, all cultures have one or more kinds of religions or worldviews. The two are intertwined. However, the term “culture” encompasses so much more than religion. It can relate to music, food customs, dancing, the way we make conversation, how we relate to other people, in short - how we behave and think in general. Culture is not a stabile category that shapes religion; it can also be shaped by religion, by economy and by other factors in a society.

Jesus is the prominent figure in Christianity. According to Christian doctrines, he is the son of God, eternal and unchangeable. If we take a look at how Jesus has been described in different times and cultures only within the US, we will find a somewhat different story:

At least in the United States, Jesus has stood not on some unchanging rock of ages, but on the shifting sands of economic circumstances, political calculations, and cultural trends. Like the apostle Paul, who once wrote that he had become “all things to all men” so that he “might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22), the American Jesus has been something of a chameleon. Christians have depicted him as black and white, male and female, straight and gay, a socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Ku Klux Klansman and a civil rights agitator.¹⁰

Religion is changeable. It changes with time, places, people and culture. Holy Scriptures are always interpreted when read, and they are interpreted in various ways depending on the

¹⁰ Prothero 2003:8

mindset of the readers and the culture the readers find themselves in. If the culture that surrounds a Muslim reader is characterized by violence, poverty and suppression, like so many Afghan Muslims are surrounded by, the way is short to interpreting their Holy Scriptures in a manner that allows for them to revolt against what they believe is the source of oppression. Then religion not only *allows* actions like those performed by the Taliban and the Al Qaeda, it is used to *legitimize* them as well.

Some places in this thesis I am talking about radical Islam or radical Muslims. I think these are better terms than the often used (and misused) term “fundamentalist”. This was originally an American Protestant term, used to describe congregations and organizations whose theology differed from the mainstream theology. Fundamentalists were people who opposed to the liberal theology and claimed to go back to the fundament of their religion, read the Bible literally and live by it. It was mainly a question about how to read the Holy Scriptures.

In Islam, the question of how to interpret the Quran has been debated in earlier times, and there are Muslim modernists who would like to revisit the question. However, the Quran is not believed to have been written by several authors in a certain cultural context, like the Bible is. The Quran is God’s divine revelation, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, word by word. “The literal divinity and inerrancy of the Qur’an is a basic dogma of Islam, and although some may doubt it, few challenge it. These differences bear no resemblance to those that divide Muslim fundamentalists from the Islamic mainstream, and the term can therefore be misleading.”¹¹ In my view, the terms “radical” or “extreme” serves the purpose of describing the extreme measures taken by violent or spiteful Islamic groups better.

Whenever I talk about US soldiers, I am referring to soldiers from the US Army, and not the other branches of the military. Why I chose the US Army is further explained in the next chapter, suffice it to say here that the US Army is the military branch that stays the longest in an area and therefore interacts the most with the local population.

¹¹ Lewis 2003:131

2.3 Religion in the United States of America

The US does not have a state religion, but is far from a secular country in the sense that some European countries try to embed. The US secularity is not the same as for example the French *laïcité*, where religion is practically banned from the public sphere. In the US, religion and state have never actually been separate in the word's strict sense. Many of America's settlers actually moved here due to religious persecution in their own country, and had a strong desire for America to ensure freedom of religion.¹² They did not necessarily seek religious freedom in the sense of encouraging religious pluralism, "but rather to escape from a religious establishment with which they disagreed in order to found a new established church."¹³ Religion had been a part of the settler's public sphere since long before they arrived in the US, and they did not wish to abandon the idea of an established church altogether.

The first ten amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights, and in the very First Amendment, freedom of religion is guaranteed. This is a good indication of how important the Founding Fathers considered religious freedom to be. The first amendment is based on the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson. In 1786 this statute was incorporated into state law by James Madison, who elaborated on it, describing the right to religious freedom as prescribed by God, which makes it holy. "If this freedom is abused, it is an offence against God, *not against man*".¹⁴ It seems that religious freedom in the US was established first and foremost to guarantee the Christians their right to freely practice Christianity, "we find very few arguments for religious freedom motivated by any desire to promote religious diversity and hospitality to non-Christians".¹⁵ The whole idea of religious freedom is closely linked to the Protestant theological tradition which states that Christian faith cannot be coerced, but depends on human's free will. If that is true, then one has to facilitate a state where the individual mind is free to choose to believe.

¹² Beal 2008:67

¹³ Bellah et al. 2008:220

¹⁴ Beal 2008:71

¹⁵ *ibid*:72

The same amendment that ensures religious freedom, also includes the establishment clause which prohibits the congress of making laws “respecting an establishment of religion”¹⁶, which basically states that church and state shall be separate entities. There has been, and there still is, a debate as to whether or not the US is a religious country. The answer, as I see it, has to be yes and no. “Thanks to the establishment clause, the US government is secular by law; thanks to the free exercise clause, American society is religious by choice”.¹⁷

In a survey where the participants were asked to describe their own religious identification in 2001, 76,5% said they belonged to some kind of Christian tradition, 3,7% belonged to other religions and 5,4% did not belong to any religious group. Only 0,5% of the people in the survey defined themselves as Muslims.¹⁸ Where I live, in Daytona Beach, there are churches at practically every street corner, and on Sundays, their parking lots are packed with cars. Americans also donate more money and time to religious organizations than to all other voluntary associations put together.¹⁹

The US’ chosen leaders also reflect the religious makeup of the country. All the American presidents have been Christians, and all save one have been Protestants.²⁰ According to law professor Jay Wexler, 90% of the members of Congress “consult their religious beliefs when voting on legislation. A majority of Americans believe that religious organizations should publicly express their views on political issues, and an even stronger majority believe it is important for a President to have strong religious beliefs”.²¹

The former President is a prime representative of a political leader employing religious rhetoric. George W. Bush announced in his State of the Union Address January 29. 2002, that Iran, Iraq, North Korea “and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil”. He also claimed that America was called by history to fight for freedom, and that “We want to be a Nation that serves goals larger than self.” This clearly goes to show that for the President, the 9/11 attacks and the

¹⁶ “Constitution of the United States: Bill of Rights”, *Yale Law School*.

¹⁷ Prothero 2007:42

¹⁸ Kosmin and Keysar 2006:36

¹⁹ Bellah et al. 2008:219

²⁰ Beal 2008:53-54

²¹ Wexler, Jay D. 2002 in Prothero 2007:5

consequent GWOT²² deal with more than worldly affairs, and God is in the midst of it all: “Many have discovered again that even in tragedy, especially in tragedy, God is near.”²³ Bush’s ultimate religious war reference may be his naming the GWOT “a crusade” against terrorism. This reference rang alarm bells, not so much in America as in Europe, where leaders like Prime Minister Tony Blair went out of their way to explain that the war against terrorism would not be a war between Muslims and Christians.²⁴

In the 1830s, Toqueville observed a new, segmented and privatized religion. He labeled American Christianity as individualistic, and remarked that although state and church were separated in the US, religion was nevertheless “the first of their political institutions”.²⁵ And as Chesterton once said, the US has long been “a nation with the soul of a church”.²⁶

2.4 Civil religion

Robert Bellah coined (or rather, borrowed from Rousseau) the term “civil religion” to describe religion in America. With this term, he explains that religion in America concerns both the Judaeo-Christian tradition and a generalized religion of “the American way of life”. He uses the speeches of American presidents to show that God is often mentioned in the public sphere. One can question how the presidents can use God’s name when state and church are separated, but “the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension”.²⁷ In fact, bringing God to the political table may provide a sense of security for the people. The White House conveys a message saying that even the President, who is the country’s highest authority, answers to higher power, and is therefore responsible for his actions, not only before the people and himself, but also before God. If you hear enough speeches from American presidents, you could get the sense that something is missing if they do not mention God in speeches where topics of great importance are presented, like the GWOT.

²² Global War on Terrorism

²³ “Bush State of the Union address” *CNN*, 2002.

²⁴ “Europe cringes at Bush ‘crusade’ against terrorists” *Ford*:2001.

²⁵ Bellah et al. 2008:223

²⁶ Prothero 2007:44

²⁷ “Civil Religion in America” *Bellah*:1967.

One of the criterions needed in order to wage war where human lives will inevitably be lost, is the criterion of right authority. A recognized state like the US has that authority, but when it comes to war, there will always be opponents and people who are unsure if this is the right action to take. What higher authority is there than God? For the majority of Americans, God will be the ultimate authority. Which god we are talking about is not necessarily specified, and a detailed specification is not demanded by the public either. There seems to be an unspoken consensus that “God” refers to the ultimate sovereign, judge and guardian, no matter if you are Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic or Jew. Notice, for example, that the term used by the president is never “Jesus Christ bless America”; this would be too specific.

This civil religion was never meant to be a substitute for Christianity. Christianity has many different denominations and theologies, and for a public figure to refer to a specific form of Christianity would not only be divisive, it could also be interpreted as a violation to the first amendment that mentions religious freedom. In order for the politicians to mention God, it would have to be a kind of God that different religious groups could relate to. However, it is clear that in the US, when presidents and other politicians talk about God, they are referring to the biblical God. They do not even need to explicitly mention God’s name in order for us to see the biblical references. Let us look at one example from President Jefferson’s inaugural:

They came already here-the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened-to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.²⁸

The exile is clearly a reference to the Israelites in Egypt, and the covenant relates to the covenant between God and his people. The terms of the covenant relate to the Mosaic Law, and as we can read in the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites flourished when they honored the covenant and abided by the law. So Europe is Egypt and America becomes the new Israel, the *Promised Land*.²⁹

²⁸ ibid

²⁹ ibid

The US is “One nation, under God”, their dollar bills say “In God we trust” and if you should ever find yourself having to give a testimony in an American courtroom, you would probably have to swear to “tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God” with your hand on the Bible. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was inspired by both classical natural law and biblical religion when he wrote that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights”.³⁰ The US is very much based on the Founding Fathers’ belief that God gave life to man and provided us with what we need. God, whoever he is, is the ultimate sovereign. The best way for a man to act becomes then, implicitly and sometimes explicitly expressed politically, to do the will of God. It is therefore not surprising at all to hear God mentioned in speeches where the war in Afghanistan is the topic.

2.5 Religious literacy in the US

Americans are not taught about religion in public schools, and it can seem like many of them do not see *why* one should be taught about religion. Whenever an American asks me what my major at the university is, and I tell them it is religion, they usually ask me if I am going to be a pastor or a minister. One even asked me if I studied to be a nun. When I explain that religion is a mandatory subject in all public schools in Norway, they often think that public schools are religious schools. When I say I am studying to be a teacher, they usually think I will be preaching in school. It is clearly not common to study religions unless you are aiming for a career within a religious community or organization. The US is a very religious country in the sense that many people attend religious meetings and believe in God, but what Americans *know about* religion, even their own, may not be very substantial:

Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion. They are Protestants who can’t name the four Gospels, Catholics who can’t name the seven sacraments, and Jews who can’t name the five books of Moses. Atheists may be as rare in America as Jesus-loving politicians are in Europe, but here faith is almost entirely devoid of content. One of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates.³¹

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ Prothero 2007:2

After 9/11, President Bush several times stated that “Islam is peace”, while renowned televangelists and prominent conservatives declared the Prophet Muhammad “a terrorist” and Islam “a religion of war”. How could the American population determine who were right if they had not been taught about Islam?³² Also, it could have been easy to get confused when Bush first said that Islam is peace, and then called the war on terror “a crusade”, which is probably history’s worst memory of Christian-Muslim conflicts. That is, if Americans of today would know what the crusades were.

Given that there are Christian Americans who do not know a lot about their own religion, it must be even harder to understand Islam. Prothero (2007) writes that in a recent survey of American teenagers where they were asked to list the world’s five major religions, barely half could list Buddhism, less than half listed Judaism and far fewer could name Islam or Hinduism.³³ The official magazine of the National Association of Independent Schools claimed in 2002 that there was a “high level of religious illiteracy” even in the country’s elite private schools.³⁴

So what is religious literacy? Moore (2007) gives the following definition for what she believes is the “minimal standard necessary for achieving religious literacy”:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts, beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world’s religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.³⁵

Or, put simpler, religious literacy refers to “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives”.³⁶ Later in this thesis, I will explore how “literate” US soldiers are when it comes to religion in Afghanistan.

³² *ibid*:5

³³ *ibid*:12

³⁴ *ibid*:15

³⁵ Moore 2007:56-57

³⁶ Prothero 2007:22

2.6 Religion in Afghanistan

Since before Alexander the Great's time, Afghanistan has endured invasion, internal upheaval and external pressure. The country has been of interest to imperial ambitions "since the beginning of recorded history, from the world's first transcontinental superpower, the Persian Empire, to its latest, the United States".³⁷ Afghans have endured and resisted many different attempts to invade them, and they present the same problems to the invaders now that they did 2,500 years ago.

Arab Muslim forces invaded Afghanistan around year 650, and during the following 150-200 years, all previous religious traditions were cast out and Islamic customs took root over almost all of the country. Afghanistan was then ruled by Muslim dynasties and kings.³⁸ The country has been predominantly Muslim ever since, and religion is what the different ethnic groups have in common. Religion and politics have never been separated in Muslim Afghanistan. While the US constitution has always ensured religious freedom and the possibility of religious pluralism, and never had a state church, Afghanistan with its Muslim rulers has never had a distinct separation of state and religion.

Afghanistan is a land-locked country with borders to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan, Iran and Turkmenistan, and it is inhabited by many different ethnic groups. Different groups are organized into different tribes, and different languages are spoken. The rural tribes of Afghanistan are familiar with the mountainous, unfriendly terrain that you find many places in the country, so even when invaded by mighty countries that have more modern weapons, they have the advantage of knowing how to prevent foreigners from taking over their territory.

As mentioned above, there are any different ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The country's population is called "Afghans", which is a term that originally referred to the Pashtun people alone. It is difficult to give an accurate census of population in Afghanistan due to all the wars and migration. The CIA estimated in 2009 that the country has 28,396,000 inhabitants, out of which there are 42% Pashtuns, 27% Tajiks, 9% Hazaras, 9% Uzbeks, 4% Aimaks, 3% Turkmen,

³⁷ Tanner 2009:1

³⁸ Youngerman & Wahab 2010:53

2% Baluchis, and 4% “others”. Some of the groups share customs and traditions that bind them together, but religion is the single most unifying factor for all the peoples of this country.³⁹

Before the Civil War in Afghanistan, religious life in the country was very influenced by Sufi leaders who had a more introspective approach to Islam. Almost 30 years of Civil War created a very unstable and unsafe country, and provided fertile ground for the more stern and strict Wahhabi Islam. Wahhabism was founded by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), who claimed to know the *only* right way to be a Muslim. The central point of his doctrine was that all ideas added to the Muslim community after around 950 CE were false and had to be eliminated. He preached a very strict Islam that was intolerant to any kind of progress made in society. He also had a strong emphasis on the unity of God, which did not allow for the sanctification or veneration of anyone or anything else. Wahhabists of today oppose to any kind of reform movements and attempts to reinterpret the Quran.⁴⁰ Conflict is connected with religion in Afghanistan; some have claimed that the spread of the insurgency in recent time was rendered possible with the help of village mullahs in the Pashtun countryside.⁴¹

In the West, Christianity is perceived to be a monotheistic religion. In Afghanistan, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the doctrine of the Trinity makes Christianity a polytheistic religion. Every man must obey God, and every man is himself responsible for his deeds. There are no virgin or saints who can pray for you, and no Messiah who by his mercy gives you life everlasting. All men must submit fully to God, and their duty in life is to obey him.⁴² Islam is an extremely monotheistic religion. You might say that the word “extremely” is superfluous, that it is either monotheistic or it is not, but most Muslims would agree that a monotheistic faith cannot include a Trinity, while a Christian says it can. For a Christian, it might seem even more polytheistic to honor the Prophet Muhammad to the extent that Muslims do. In the West, Jesus is mocked in the media all the time and the mockers face no repercussions, while if one were to mock the Prophet Muhammad, they might risk their life. Here, culture plays a big role in how

³⁹ Youngerman & Wahab 2010:13-14

⁴⁰ “Wahhabism and Wahhabi Islam: How Wahhabi Islam Differs from Sunni, Shia Islam” Cline.

⁴¹ Vogelsang 2008:341-342, Giustozzi 2007:43-6

⁴² Barth 2010:25

religion is perceived and performed. Western democracy allows for freedom of speech, and although the Bible clearly says one should not have other gods or misuse God's name⁴³, it is for the most part tolerated in Western countries. Such freedoms are not found in many Muslim countries, and that aspect of culture and its impact on Islam can make it seem like Islam in itself is more austere than Christianity although both the Bible and the Quran contains strict warnings against blasphemy.

There are different ways of practicing Islam, but as mentioned above, Islam in Afghanistan has been very influenced by the Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia. A Muslim is supposed to follow and obey God's commands, which includes their Statement of Faith, the 5 daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, almsgiving to the poor and, if one can afford it, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Women must cover their hair and most of their body, and women and men who are not related cannot interact without the woman being escorted by a male guardian. The consumption of swine and wine is strictly prohibited.⁴⁴

To give an indication as to how important religion is to the different ethnic groups in Afghanistan, we can take a look at some of the groups' stories concerning their origin. Many Pashtuns once considered their ancestors to be among the 10 lost tribes of ancient Israel; others claimed that Afghana, King Saul's grandson, was the progenitor of the Pashtuns. However, ever since the spread of anti-Israel sentiments among Muslims, the most wide-spread legend today says that they are the descendants of Quais, one of the Prophet Muhammad's companions. According to legend, Quais heard that a prophet had risen in Mecca, and so he went there to become a Muslim. This way, Pashtuns can claim that they were never conquered and forced to convert to Islam, and that makes them true Muslims by choice.⁴⁵

The Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims who live by a strict code of honor called the "Pashtunwali". It states that all Pashtuns should be hospitable and never refuse asylum to guests in need of help. It also describes how misdeeds should be revenged in order to get justice, and how the Pashtun men are always to protect their family, property and land. They do not necessarily respond well to a strong, central power, since personal independence is valued

⁴³ Exodus 20:3 and 7, Deuteronomy 5:7 and 11. The Bible, New International Version, 2011.

⁴⁴ Barth 2010:26

⁴⁵ ibid:16

among them. Rules are set by local elders who discuss tribal issues among themselves.⁴⁶ It is extremely important to understand the culture of this group of people. “If history is any guide, whoever mobilizes the Pashtuns rule Afghanistan, and Afghanistan cannot be ruled without their consent.”⁴⁷ Most of the Taliban members are Pashtuns.

Almost all Hazaras are Shiite Muslims, possibly influenced by the Safavid dynasti which imposed Shiism in Iran. It could also be that they became Shiite Muslims at the time when the Mongols first converted to Islam. The Hazaras have often been oppressed on religious ground.⁴⁸

Then we have the communities of people with fair hair and blue eyes in the mountains in the northeast. Legend has it that they are descendants of Alexander the Great, and they used to practice a polytheistic religion not inconsistent with Greek mythological belief. Their part of the country was known as Kafiristan, or “Land of the Infidels”, because of their religion. Its people were forced to convert to Islam around 1896⁴⁹, and this region was then called Nuristan, or “Land of the Light”.⁵⁰ Even though the constitution of 2004 grants religious freedom to all citizens⁵¹, it is not easy to be a minority in Afghanistan.

2.7 Why Americans and Afghans can have difficulties understanding each other

So far we have seen that religion in the US and religion in Afghanistan are two very different things. Even when Christianity and Islam seem alike at the outset, there are nuances that separate the two, like in the question about monotheism. Also, we see that the comparison is not just about Christianity and Islam as two entities set in stone. The religions do not exist in a vacuum. Although the US is predominantly a Christian country, there are many denominations and variations in practice, and there are also several other religions and people who consider themselves atheists or agnostics. Then we have their civil religion, where an unspecified God is often mentioned by the country’s leaders. In Afghanistan, the picture seems a bit easier to grasp.

⁴⁶ Youngerman & Wahab 2010:15

⁴⁷ Sinno 2008:59

⁴⁸ Youngerman & Wahab 2010:1

⁴⁹ Junger 2011:47

⁵⁰ Tanner 2009:64

⁵¹ Youngerman & Wahab 2010:19

Almost all of the population is Muslim, and politics and Islam goes hand in hand. However, here too, Islam is influenced by culture and mixed with local traditions. An American Muslim could have a hard time understanding the ideas and practices of Afghan Muslims. The country has had to deal with so many wars, insurgencies and poverty, and Islam has been used to unite peoples and legitimize actions undertaken.

A lot of literature about religion, society and interreligious communication divides our time into pre 9/11 and post 9/11. The atrocities committed by terrorists on that day have made a lasting imprint in American history and American minds. As I described earlier, there are many surveys that indicate a widespread religious illiteracy among Americans. Before 9/11, many people did not know much about Islam. It may be the same way today, but after 9/11, Americans could hear that the attacks were committed by a *Muslim* terrorist organization. There is a real chance that American soldiers are sent to Afghanistan with troubling stereotypes and associations about Muslims. Also, literacy when it comes to other religions than Islam, or literacy at all, is low in Afghanistan, and there are many Afghans who interpret the war as an attack on Islam, and who have their own preconceived notions about the Americans who are invading their country.

In the following I will give a few examples on specific areas where American and Afghan societies, and the role religion plays in society, differ a lot. These are areas in which there is a high probability that people from one country will encounter challenges when it comes to understanding and communicating with people from the other.

2.8 Religion and nation

There is a strong sense of nationalism in the US, and the country has many patriots. The civil religion-term says something about how the nation is so important to Americans that it is, in a way, held holy. The basic unit of human organization in the West is the nation. “Muslims, however, tend to see not a nation subdivided into religious groups but a religion subdivided into

nations”.⁵² The conflict in Afghanistan is not a conflict between nations, but a conflict between the US and NATO on one side and extremist Muslim groups like the Taliban and Al Qaeda on the other.

Taliban soldiers do not reside only in Afghanistan, and there mainly in the Southwest, but also in large part in Pakistan. Pakistan became a country after WWII, in 1947, and the main reason for the separation of Pakistan into a country separate from India, was religion. It was decided that Muslim Pakistan would split from Hindu India since Islam had spread to India through Afghanistan. Muslims fled north and Hindus fled south in the partition riot.⁵³ Islamic soldiers, officials and historians have on occasions referred to their enemy not in ethnic or national terms, but simply as infidels. In the same way, they refer to themselves as Muslims. This explains why the Muslims of today’s Pakistan feel more connected to Afghans than Indians, even though their country was a part of India for such a long time.⁵⁴ Pakistan shares a Pashtun population with Afghanistan, and the Pakistani government has long been using Islam as an all-incorporating feature for all the ethnic groups in the country to prevent an insurgency from militant Pashtuns. This has worked well, but since late 2011 the Pakistani government has been working with the US, which has not been easily accepted among Pakistanis.⁵⁵

For many Muslims, the American presence in the Middle East and Afghanistan is perceived as an imperialist attempt to undermine Islam and suppress Muslims. For many Afghans it is “hard to accept that their security is dependent on the same military power that elsewhere in the world flushes the Quran down the toilet.”⁵⁶ The expression “sleeping with the devil” is often used about Afghan cooperation with the infidel Americans.⁵⁷

⁵² Lewis 2003:xx

⁵³ Tanner 2009:225

⁵⁴ Lewis 2003:xxii

⁵⁵ Vogelsang 2008:345

⁵⁶ *ibid*:343

⁵⁷ *ibid*

2.9 Religion and politics

If we compare Jesus as the founder of Christianity to Muhammad as the founder of Islam, we find that Jesus said: “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s”⁵⁸, while Muhammad founded his own state and empire. Muhammad was a leader and warrior, and for the first Muslims, religion and politics “were indissolubly associated: the first sanctified the second, the second sustained the first”.⁵⁹ In the history of Christendom in the US, religion and politics have never been one and the same, even if political leaders usually are Christians.

Religious leaders in the West cannot count on the same public support and participation as many religious leaders in Muslim countries can. There is a general acceptance of critical thinking around religion in the West, both among the clergy and among non-Christians. Being able to think critically about religion can even be seen as important for one’s own faith. There are many books written by Christian authors that criticize Christianity rather harshly. Even democratic Muslim societies do not have the same accept for criticizing Islam or the Prophet Muhammad. Muslim religious leaders also have a strong public authority in most Muslim countries.⁶⁰

For an American who has not been taught about religions in public school, and who may only have knowledge about his or her own Christian denomination, it can be difficult to separate Islam from radical Islamism. It can be understandably more difficult to distinguish different radical groups from one another. There are many types of radical Islamist groups in different countries, and you can also find varied groups within one country. The Taliban and Al Qaeda can be seen either as brave Muslim warriors or as traitors and not righteous believers by other Muslims. Protestant fundamentalist groups have usually differed from the mainstream theological standings. When it comes to Muslim radical groups, their critique is more societal:

The Islamic world, in their view, has taken a wrong turning. Its rulers call themselves Muslims and make a pretense of Islam, but they are in fact apostates who have abrogated the Holy Law and adopted foreign and infidel laws and customs. The only solution, for them, is a return to the authentic Muslim way of life, and for this the removal of the apostate governments is an essential first step. Fundamentalists are anti-Western

⁵⁸ Matt 22:21, New International Version, 2011.

⁵⁹ Lewis 2003:7

⁶⁰ *ibid*:17

in the sense that they regard the West as the source of evil that is corroding the Muslim society, but their primary attack is directed against their own rulers and leaders.⁶¹

It may not feel that way for an American soldier deploying to Afghanistan post 9/11, when the Twin Towers and the Pentagon got attacked. It may feel like the Muslim world gangs up to overthrow the US as their main enemy. However, it is not “the Muslims” as a homogeneous group that is out to destroy America. It is a small, but significant, fraction of radicals, and their goal is not only to kill and traumatize Americans, but also to give a statement to their own society and impose their view of the “correct” way of practicing Islam in their countries.

What an American may not realize, is that in the eyes of many Muslims in Afghanistan, Americans (at least the ones who are not Muslims) are infidels. Civil Afghans may not agree with all the rules and prohibitions imposed in Afghanistan by the Taliban, but they are still Muslims who wish to do the will of God. The Taliban tries to convey the message that they are fighting a *jihad*, or holy war, for God, and then it follows that their opponents are fighting against God. Any military action undertaken by American forces or ISAF⁶², can therefore be perceived as actions undertaken against God.

2.10 Religion and jihad

According to Islamic Law, Sharia, war is a means to a political end, which is establishing an Islamic state. The establishment of a state is, in turn, a means to an overarching religious goal: the calling of all of humanity to Islam.⁶³ In order for a war to be just in Islam, it has to be tied to the purposes of establishing Islamic states governed by true Muslims and the mission to spread Islam.⁶⁴

The concept of jihad is important, and difficult, for westerners to fully grasp. According to Sharia, Muslims can wage war against four types of enemies: infidels, apostates, rebels, and

⁶¹ *ibid*:24

⁶² International Security Assistance Force, the NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan

⁶³ Kelsay 2006:87

⁶⁴ *ibid*:88

bandits. These four types are all legitimate, but only the two first count as a jihad. A jihad can be fought both offensively and defensively. Soldiers and professionals can take care of the offensive jihad, while it becomes an obligation for all Muslims to take part in the defensive jihad. Osama bin Laden declared a jihad against the United States on grounds of their being infidels, and having offended the Muslim world with their exploitation.⁶⁵

So the war against the US is a jihad against infidels. But the conflict does not end there, in the minds of radical Muslims. There is also a jihad going on against the apostates. Being an apostate is far worse than simply being an infidel. Infidels have never “seen the light”, and can be somewhat excused on grounds that they do not know any better. According to Muslim law, they can be tolerated and allowed to practice their own religion in a Muslim country, as long as they stay within the laws of the country. The apostates, however, have seen and known God, and still choose to abandon “the right belief”. Many Muslim rulers who are friends and allies with the West are regarded as traitors and apostates by their own people, who do not think of them as faithful Muslims given that they cooperate with the infidels in the West.⁶⁶ This can make it very difficult for Muslim leaders who have a friendly attitude towards the West, to obtain their own people’s trust and support. Afghanistan’s president, Hamid Karzai, has lived through several assassination attempts from groups like the Taliban, who do not see him as fit to be Afghanistan’s leader.

For many Muslims, bin Laden’s declaration of jihad is a travesty of the true nature of Islam. The Quran speaks of peace as well as war, and the violent way of interpreting it is only one of many. However, terrorism requires only a few in order to effectively attain its goals. Surely, everyone must be allowed to defend themselves against terrorism. “But in devising means to fight the terrorists, it would surely be useful to understand the forces that drive them.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Lewis 2003:31

⁶⁶ *ibid*: 40-41

⁶⁷ *ibid*:xxii

2.11 Religion, imperialism and democracy

The US can be perceived by Afghans as imperialists. The word *imperialism* is never used by Muslims of the great Muslim expansions. The expansion of Islam is seen by Muslims to be beneficial to all those who convert, while conversion from Islam can be seen as a capital offense.⁶⁸ For Americans, it can seem strange that the Muslim world sees them as imperialists. It was, after all, the Western *European* countries who tried to expand their empires all around the world, and even though European countries are their allies, Americans do generally not think they deserve the blame for European imperialism.

In 1979, USA was named “the Great Satan” by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini. He also named Israel “the Little Satan”, and sat “death to America” as the order of the day. Americans tried to figure out the cause of these anti-American sentiments, and some tried to point out that America had itself been a victim of colonization, struggled against it, and won their independence through the American Revolution. The Muslim world did not accept their claiming to be a victim of colonialism since the US was made up of European colonialists who stole the country from Native Americans.⁶⁹

Christians usually think of the colonial age as something in the past, and in many, if not most, of the missionary organizations of today, the goal is to establish churches that can be lead by indigenous people. Mission goes both ways, and “Third-World Christianity is itself an active contributor to both the missionary enterprise and the theological traditions.”⁷⁰ The colonial era is, however, not as easily forgotten by Muslims. Religion and state are so intertwined in Afghanistan, and since the population is largely uneducated and illiterate⁷¹, they cannot be expected to know that state and religion is more separate in the US and that an American military presence does not necessarily mean an attempt to spread Christianity and suppress Islam... or maybe a suppression of Islam and the furthering of American civil religion *is* necessary in order to bring peace and democracy to Afghanistan? US Army Col. Darley seems to think so:

⁶⁸ *ibid*:55

⁶⁹ *ibid*:86-87

⁷⁰ Zebiri 1997:32

⁷¹ According to the CIA World Factbook, the literacy rate in Afghanistan is only 28,1% (“The World Factbook” CIA, 2011)

Consequently, with regard to Iraq and Afghanistan, the most important question military planners and policy makers should ask themselves is, What essential elements and tools in the spectrum of cultural knowledge does the military need to master in order to change the basic values underpinning that culture? More than taxonomies of cultural facts or even acquisition of linguistic skills, the military needs a sophisticated understanding of applied techniques that specifically effect cultural transformation of values within societies.⁷²

To further explain how the values of Islam do not match with the idea of a democracy, he continues by quoting Al Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden: "Democracy is a Greek word meaning the rule of the people, which means that the people do what they see fit. . . . This concept is considered apostasy and defies the belief in one God-Muslims' doctrine."⁷³ Darley is right to say that sustainable democracies are hard to create. However, he quotes the most notorious Islamic radical of our time in saying that democracy is essential un-Islamic. There are Muslims in Afghanistan who disagree with him. But it is important to recognize the challenges in engaging this kind of battle. Promoters of democracy are at disadvantage up against radical Islam. The ideology of democracy gives the radicals freedom and rights, while the radical Muslims are under no such obligation. "On the contrary, their principles require them to suppress what they see as impious and subversive activities."⁷⁴

Radical Muslims see this war as a war of self-defense, where they are fighting a battle for the survival of their religion. In their minds, the Crusades never ended. They believe that actions carried out in self-defense can justify all sorts of tactics that could not be employed were it not a state of emergency.⁷⁵

2.12 Religion and way of life

Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian who became a leading ideologue of radical Islam, spent two years in the US. Upon his return to Egypt, he started writing about his view on the lifestyle he witnessed in America. He perceived the US culture as sinful and degenerate, with an outrageous sexual promiscuity. He was also horrified by the materialism he saw in the US, and meant that

⁷² "Strategic Imperative: The Necessity for Values Operations as Opposed to Information Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan." Darley:2007

⁷³ ibid

⁷⁴ Lewis 2003:111

⁷⁵ Burke 2004:288

even their religion was materialistic. American churches, he said, attracted parishioners by advertising shamelessly, like ordinary businesses. In church, people of both sexes could meet, which for him made the churches resemble more a nightclub than a house of prayer.⁷⁶

If you keep in mind that many Muslim countries practice the tradition of arranged marriages and that many Muslims will not allow a female to walk alone in the streets without a male relative as a guardian, it is understandable why this encounter with American churches could be a culture shock. Afghanistan is one of several Muslim countries in which arranged marriages between young girls and older men are still very common⁷⁷.

When it comes to worship services, many Americans think it is important to have a good time and have fun in church, while for Muslims it is not about them having fun, their services are all about submitting to God's divine will and serving him. In a mosque, the women and men will have separate rooms for prayer, so that they will not distract each other and take focus from what is important. Religion in America might not seem like religion at all for an Afghan, while Afghan religious practices might for an American seem rigid and misogynistic.

2.13 Gender, family and religion

Traditional Fiqh (jurisprudence) draws sharp distinctions between man and woman. At one point in time, Islamic Law was ahead of its time when it came to women's rights, since it guaranteed women's economical rights in marriage, and their right to partake in the governing of property and fortune. Now, however, by an American standard, Islamic Law has not been keeping up with time. Women inherit only half of what a man inherits, a woman's testimony in court counts for only half of that of a man, and if a woman is killed, the murderer has to pay the victim's family half of what he would have to pay if it were a man who got killed.⁷⁸

When it comes to marriage too, a man has more rights. A man has the right to marry a woman who is Muslim, Christian or Jew, while a Muslim woman can only legally marry a

⁷⁶ Lewis 2003:78-79

⁷⁷ "Forced and early marriages still common for girls in Afghanistan" Walther:2009.

⁷⁸ Vogt 2005:114

Muslim.⁷⁹ Certainly there are Muslim scholars who argue that men and women should have the same rights, but in many, if not most, Muslim communities of today, this is not the case. Afghanistan is a good example of that.

The Arabic word *hijab* comes from *hajaba*, which means “to hide”. In the Quran, the word refers mainly to segregation and separateness, not a headscarf.⁸⁰ For Afghans, women and men have traditionally been segregated from birth. The daughters spent all their time at home with their mothers, while the sons were out in the fields with their fathers. This arrangement kept boys and girls apart until the day of their marriage. In their houses, there are separate rooms for entertaining female and male guests, so that the sexes do not have to interact. This strict form of separation may explain the Pashtun resistance for education of girls and women. If they send their daughters to school, they do not have the same control over them, and if they get an education, they might get professions where they work with men, which is not suitable. A man’s honor depends largely on the women in his family and how they behave.⁸¹ They are his property, and he needs to be able to protect them from the outside world. There have been incidents where American soldiers have abruptly entered Afghan households, which is problematic. Having armed soldiers entering your house can be an unpleasant experience for any family, but here, the fact that male American soldiers can barge in and see unveiled, Afghan women in their homes, makes it far worse. It is an offense to both the man’s rights and the women’s honor.

2.14 What Afghans know about Americans and their intentions in Afghanistan

As previously mentioned, literacy and education are not commodities that every Afghan citizen can benefit from. The opposite is closer to reality. Hence, a great number of Afghans know little to nothing about the American soldiers present in their country. Since the language barrier and other contributing factors make communication between the nationalities difficult, it is not easy for American soldiers to convey to the Afghans the reasons for their presence, nor their intentions.

⁷⁹ *ibid*

⁸⁰ *ibid*:123

⁸¹ Barth 2010:40-41

Canadian researcher Norine MacDonald has spent five years in Afghanistan and done several surveys among Afghans about their knowledge of, and attitude towards, Americans. In October 2010, when the war in Afghanistan had been going on for nine years, the responses she got showed that 50% of those polled think recent military operations are bad for the Afghan people; 58% think it is wrong to work with foreign forces; 55% oppose military operations against the Taliban in their area, and, especially noteworthy in this context; 72% of the Afghans polled say that foreigners disrespect their religion.⁸² Also, we know that 9/11 made a huge impact on Americans, and the terrorist attack carried out on US soil on that date was the major motivator for the US waging of this war. In Afghanistan, 9/11 does not carry the same significance: “When pollsters read a simple summary of the Sept. 11, 2001, attack and its aftermath to a sample of 1,000 young men in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, only 8 percent said they knew about this event.”⁸³

Sebastian Junger, a journalist who followed American soldiers in the Korengal valley for 15 months, could report that “most Korengalis have never left their village and have almost no understanding of the world beyond the mouth of the valley. (...) One old man in the valley thought the American soldiers were actually Russians who had simply stayed after the Soviet army pulled out in 1989.”⁸⁴

The jihad against the West is not necessarily all that important to local Afghans. As we can see, many of them know little about the US. In his book, “War”, Junger mentions that somewhere in the Korengal valley there is a boulder painted with jihadist graffiti, “but it’s in Arabic instead of Pashto because locals aren’t as enthused about the war as the outsiders.”⁸⁵ Afghans have repeatedly expressed their desire to have control over their own country. If they do not know about the 9/11 attacks, how can they be expected to trust that American soldiers are not there to conquer their country, desecrate their traditions, and eliminate their religion?

⁸² “Afghans want their country back – and Americans should listen” Ignatius:2010

⁸³ ibid

⁸⁴ Junger 2011:47

⁸⁵ ibid:249

2.15 The Taliban and their strategic use of Islam

Abdulkader H. Sinno argues that since Islam is so important in Afghanistan, the strategic use of Islam facilitates the rise to power, and can be used to legitimize actions and undermine those of the enemy. He recognizes that there are other factors that play an important role, but thinks that religion is so important in this region that “the strategic use of religious language and symbols brings additional advantages in this traditional society and may have tipped the balance in a number of the brutal and closely-contested conflicts that have plagued the country since 1979”.⁸⁶ The strategic use of Muslim rhetoric has proven to be more efficient than nationalist and other symbols.

The Taliban was of course an actor in one of those conflicts. They claimed to be the most Islamic of all organizations in Afghanistan and said they would bring Sharia to the country. The word *Taliban* means “student”, and refers to students at madrasas⁸⁷ in Pashtun areas. They were a small group of religious students and became an organization that dominated more than nine-tenths of Afghanistan in less than five years”.⁸⁸ They inspired religious and superstitious fear; there were rumors circulating stating that those who fired upon a Taliban would be stricken with fear, experience unexplainable and sudden bleedings, or fall into a coma.⁸⁹

Once in power, the Taliban employed an extremely strict version of Sharia to keep the population under control. They executed people by stoning or hanging them in public, closed all schools for girls, forced women to wear a *chadri*⁹⁰ in public and never leave home without a male escort, they banned TV, radio, un-Islamic music and dance, demanded that all men let their beard grow, and severely punished those who failed to follow these rules.⁹¹ Taliban leader Mullah Omar called himself “Commander of the Faithful” and named the country “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”. He also appeared in public in front of 2000 religious leaders wearing the cloak

⁸⁶ Sinno 2010:1

⁸⁷ A *madrasa* is a school where Islamic theology and Sharia are taught.

⁸⁸ Sinno 2010:17-18

⁸⁹ *ibid*:20

⁹⁰ The Afghan *chadri* is a Muslim clothing for women that covers all of their body, and leaves only a grille or a net in front of their eyes for them to see through. (“Ethnic jewelry and textiles” *Uberkuchi.com*, 2007.)

⁹¹ Barth 2010:48

of Muhammad, a symbol of Islamic authority.⁹² The Muslim identity of the Taliban gave them support from like-minded people in other Muslim countries like Pakistan and Saudi-Arabia.

The Taliban sees the US as an infidel occupier, and any Afghans who cooperate with the US become apostates. Incidents like desecrations of the Quran by American soldiers, the West's disrespect of the Prophet Muhammad⁹³ and the Quran burning by pastor Terry Jones⁹⁴ have caused riots many places in Afghanistan. The Taliban uses concepts that Afghans know and can relate to, like *jihad* and *Sharia*, while the US employs concepts that do not have much meaning for the impoverished and largely uneducated peoples of Afghanistan, like *democracy*.⁹⁵

In the attempt to disarm and dismantle the Taliban and rebuild Afghanistan, many say it is important to let all voices be heard in the process, including the voices of the Taliban: “Cultivating confidence by honestly valuing the contributions of everyone, even (and perhaps especially) those with whom we disagree is another cornerstone of a well-functioning democracy”.⁹⁶

2.16 The impact of 9/11

Afghanistan was in disarray in the 90s. Prior to 2001 the country had experienced many wars and been in a state of crisis for decades. There was no peace, democracy or respect for the UN Human Rights. Still, there were no immediate plans for intervention by the West. The closest they came to intervene and help the Afghan people, was when the US indirectly supported Afghans by donating money and guns to the Mujahedeen warriors so they could fight the Soviets.

The invasion of Afghanistan came as a direct consequence from 9/11. President Obama claimed that this was a “war of necessity”, and that if they did not intervene, the Taliban would provide a

⁹² Sinno 2010:21

⁹³ For example the Cartoon Controversy in Denmark and Norway – US allies

⁹⁴ Pastor Terry Jones declared that September 11th 2010 was the international “Burn a Quran-Day” and proclaimed to the media that he would burn Qurans in his church in Gainesville, Florida.

⁹⁵ Sinno 2010:23

⁹⁶ Moore 2007:21

safe haven for Al Qaeda to plot further attacks to the US. He said the war was “fundamental to the defense of our people”.⁹⁷

9/11 is still a fresh memory in the minds of Americans. Most Americans would probably still be able to say exactly what they were doing when the planes hit the Twin Towers, and they remember the shock they experienced. A large-scale terrorist attack had been carried out on US soil, and the common US citizen did not see it coming. “Al Qaeda” and “Taliban” were not household names, and it was not obvious to people in the US *why* the attacks were carried out. Many Americans are still not interested in real attempts to explain the Al Qaeda’s motivation; “Attempts to help answer that question by anything more complex than “They hate our freedoms...” were often silenced by accusations that proponents were “blaming America first” and were therefore unpatriotic and “anti-American””.⁹⁸ Most people probably felt an explanation was unnecessary since an attack like 9/11 could never be justified to them.

The attack led to a significant increase in hate crimes that targeted Muslims in the US. Hindus, Sikhs, and other people who were perceived to be of Middle Eastern origin were also targeted, and these hate crimes continue to persist.⁹⁹

2.17 Summary

In this chapter, I have tried to show how the US and Afghanistan are two contrasting nations in many respects. Each country has its own history and its own particular approach to politics. Still more relevant to my research question is the matter of religion, or rather, the divergence in how religion is practiced in these two countries.

From a US perspective, you might say that the war in Afghanistan has nothing to do with religion, and that it is simply a matter of terror vs. national security. I contend that since religion and politics have never been separate in great parts of the Muslim world, and certainly not in

⁹⁷ “Obama Defends Strategy in Afghanistan” Stolberg:2009.

⁹⁸ Moore 2007:3

⁹⁹ ibid

Afghanistan, religion has to be taken into careful consideration when dealing with a conflict in this area. Therefore, I deem the research on how Afghan religion is emphasized in the US Army pre-deployment schooling, and how the soldiers experienced meeting the Afghans, as relevant to this conflict.

In talking about religion, I have tried to give an introduction as to how religion is perceived and practiced in the two countries. It is important to look at both religion in the US and religion in Afghanistan, even though Afghanistan is the battlefield in the ongoing war. The US soldiers are not to be considered as “empty containers” that can be filled with information about religion in Afghanistan; they all come with baggage from their own upbringing and culture. A soldier from the US will probably encounter different challenges in understanding religion in Afghanistan compared to soldiers from other parts of the world. Americans carry their *civil religion* with them, which does not necessarily match well with the civil religion of Afghanistan, where Islam is at the very core.

There are many aspects where Afghans and Americans will most likely encounter difficulties understanding each other when it comes to religion and how religion works in society. Islam is present in Afghanistan on all levels from government politics to everyday family life. How does the Army prepare the ordinary “GI Joe” to enter a conflict with such a complicated religious and sociological aspect? Has the US strategy changed during the war in Afghanistan? Does the US Army show sensitivity towards cultural differences, or do they send their soldiers to war against terror in a human terrain they know nothing about? Do they have what it takes to respect and cooperate with their most valuable allies – the Muslims?

In fact, the greatest weapon available in the war on terrorism is the courage, decency, humour and integrity of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims. It is this that is restricting the spread of ‘al-Qaeda’ and its warped worldview, not the activities of counter-terrorist experts or the military strategists. It is this, as Islamic terrorism grows more and more fragmented, we need most. Without it we are lost. There is indeed a battle between the West and men like bin Laden. But it is not a battle for global supremacy. It is a battle for hearts and minds.¹⁰⁰

The US soldiers cannot all be psychologists, sociologists, theologians, linguists, Peace Mediators or experts in cultural and religious affairs. That is fully unrealistic and unattainable.

¹⁰⁰ Burke 2004: 291

Nevertheless, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan demands personnel that are competent to handle demanding tasks in cooperation with people with another culture, language and religion. With the war in Afghanistan, the US seeks both to defuse radical Muslims *and* provide peace and stability to the Afghan people. In my view, a good understanding as to what Islam means and how religion works in Afghan society and in radical Islamic groups in Afghanistan will facilitate attaining this goal:

Long-term success in the war on terror will depend on successfully countering the growing sympathy for the militants. An important first step will be a single, substantial paradigmatic shift in the way the threat facing us all is currently understood and addressed.

The threat is not from one man or one organization.

All terrorist violence, 'Islamic' or otherwise, is unjustifiable, unforgivable, cowardly and contemptible. But just because we condemn does not mean we should not strive to comprehend. We need to keep asking, 'Why?'¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ *ibid*:291-292

3. Method

3.1 Introduction

As described earlier, I chose the US Army's pre-Afghanistan deployment schooling, and the meeting between Afghans and Americans, as the topic for my thesis. Educated as a teacher in what in English is best described as "Comparative Religion", I find that teaching *about* religion (not *teaching religion*, there is an important difference) enables people to better understand, respect and tolerate different religious traditions and worldviews. Of course, this is not always the case. A broader knowledge about a topic does not necessarily promote tolerance and respect for it, but if you choose not to tolerate someone's religion after having learned about it, then at least your standpoint is not solely based upon pre-conceived thoughts and ideas.

The media is an important source of information in the US, and a lot of the knowledge that Americans hold about religions, come from watching, reading or listening to the news. Media's quest for the sensational often leads journalists to cover stories in which religion is used as a motivational factor for acts of terrorism, suppression of women or related topics. In 2010, Islam was the number one religious topic presented in the media, with cases such as 9/11 and Park51 receiving high coverage¹⁰². Islam is not always presented respectfully in the news. Many of the news medias want to entertain rather than educate or enlighten, and according to Prothero (2007), the US media's religious illiteracy would prevent them from being able to educate anyway.¹⁰³ It is not surprising that some Americans claim they hate Islam due to atrocities being committed by extremists in God's name. It does not have to be grave acts like terrorist activities that render people negative towards Islam either, Muslim customs and rituals can be so unfamiliar to people born and raised in the US that Americans can feel unsecure in the presence of Muslims.

My educational background, my experience living abroad in France and the US, and travels to so-called Third World countries with humanitarian organizations, has enabled me to

¹⁰² The case called "Park 51" was the controversy where Muslims wanted to build a Mosque at Ground Zero. ("Religion in the News 2010" *PewResearchCenter*, 2011.)

¹⁰³ Prothero 2007:32

see how important it is to learn about other societies before going so that one can adapt to their customs in order to communicate better and not offend anyone due to lack of knowledge. Even in France, a country so close to Norway, I have experienced embarrassing and troublesome situations because I did not behave or speak appropriate to the situation, even though I had studied the language and their culture before going. I can only imagine how American soldiers, who may not have been abroad prior to deployment, and who may not even have met a single Muslim, feel when they suddenly find themselves in Afghanistan. I have made many cultural mistakes, but fortunately for me, the fate of a family or a village, much less a whole country at war, did not depend on me while I was making those mistakes.

I will contend that the fate of the Afghans now lie very much in the hands of the US. Of course, the US cannot be held responsible for everything that happens in Afghanistan, and the Afghans will largely have to rebuild their own country, but it was the US that initiated the war, and they are the largest military force present in the country at this time. Much inspired by the US Army veteran who had served in Vietnam, described in the introduction of this thesis, I decided to explore this topic further and find out how much the US soldiers learn about Afghanistan before deployment. It would be too great of a challenge to investigate into every aspect of Afghan culture, and we cannot say that there is *one* Afghan culture, since the country is made up of so many tribes, so I decided to focus on the main religion practiced in Afghanistan, which is Islam. I could not leave out cultural aspects altogether, because religion and culture are so intertwined. People may wonder why I am emphasizing the importance of knowledge about religion in Afghanistan. I will let Moore (2007) answer that:

(...)without a basic understanding of the beliefs, symbols, literature, and practices related to the world's religious traditions, much of history and culture is rendered incomprehensible. Religion has always been and continues to be woven into the fabric of cultures and civilizations in ways that are inextricable. The failure to recognize this fact impoverishes our understanding of human experience and sends the false message that religion is primarily an individual as opposed to a social phenomenon¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰⁴ Moore 2007:5

3.2 Setting the scene - fieldwork in the USA

Initially, I thought doing fieldwork here in the US would be easier than it was. Americans are known to be so open, and they have a reputation for being talkative. Being a Norwegian in the US, I have many times been fascinated and surprised by the way strangers approach me and open up to me. Of course there are great cultural differences within the US. And to be fair, with the exception of a few trips around the US, my experience largely limits itself to Central Florida, where I live. However, Florida is to a great extent made up of people moving here from other parts of the US (there is a saying that “no one is *from* Florida”), so I have met people from all over this vast nation.

In my experience, it has been easier to engage in conversations with complete strangers here than in Norway. Also, when the topic is personal experiences and religion, many Americans seem to be more than willing to share their thoughts and feelings. Public expression of faith is very common, whereas in Europe, faith is increasingly becoming a private matter. To illustrate this; American presidents often use the well known phrase “God bless America”, while when Great Britain joined the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Prime Minister Tony Blair planned to publicly say something like “God bless us”, but was strongly advised against it. His advisers felt it would sound like “American-style” religious fanaticism or hypocrisy.¹⁰⁵ Another illustrating fact is that there has never been a non-Christian president of the United States,¹⁰⁶ which also goes to show that religious affiliation is important to many Americans when deciding who they should vote for. Based on this knowledge and my personal experiences with Americans, I initially thought doing fieldwork regarding personal experiences around pre-deployment schooling among US Army veterans would not be too difficult.

3.3 The research question choosing the research method

There are many ways of writing a thesis, and there are different research methods to choose from. I chose to do a study in the field, conducting qualitative interviews with US Army veterans who have served in Afghanistan.

¹⁰⁵ Jenkins 2007:38

¹⁰⁶ Beal 2008:53

In my case, the method got very much chosen by the research question. I was interested in *how* the US soldiers were prepared for deployment, not *if* they were prepared. If the latter had been my question, it would be more of a “yes – no” question which could be answered from a statistical survey. My intention was not to include all branches and people in the US Military, but to talk to a few veterans about their experiences in Afghanistan and get a deeper insight into what these individuals think and feel.

It was important for me to try to interpret the veterans’ information horizontally as opposed to vertically. I wanted to be respectful and represent the information given to me in a way that the veterans would agree to and recognize. A deductive approach where the researcher only seeks to get affirmation for a previously assumed theory, risks misrepresenting the people involved, and treating them as objects. According to Salomonsen (2003), the inductive research method seeks to “interprets phenomenons horizontally, in solidarity with the informants’ own understanding of the experiences they make and the worldview that is meaningful for them and which they relate to”.¹⁰⁷

This was the ideal for me, and throughout this process I have tried to stay true to the inductive research method. However, going into this project I had my own assumptions about the Army’s pre-deployment schooling before I started interviewing anyone. Based on my meeting with the Vietnam veteran, and my own pre-conceived notions about religious literacy in the US, I had my doubts regarding the quality of their preparation. It is natural to be curious and make a hypothesis about a topic before going into a study like this one. If I did not have any critical thoughts about US soldiers’ pre-deployment schooling, I would probably not have chosen this topic for my thesis. Still, I realized that what I had was merely an assumption; in reality I knew nothing about the pre-deployment schooling of soldiers going to serve in Afghanistan. I therefore did my best not to ask leading questions, and not to jump to conclusions. I strived to maintain an inductive approach where the informants’ opinions were the center, not mine.

Qualitative studies like this one cannot describe in detail how the situation really is with the preparation for deployment to Afghanistan and how all the soldiers experience their time

¹⁰⁷ Salomonsen 2003:99

over there, but it can provide an important insight as to how it was experienced by a few. From their answers we can make a hypothesis about how the schooling works for the bulk of soldiers, and this can be researched further, but we cannot generalize too much from the answers we get from a small qualitative study like this one with as few informants as I got. It was not my intent to establish validity in an objective sense and say how pre-deployment training about religion works for all the soldiers, but rather to say something about how training was perceived and whether it was useful for a selection of soldiers. I chose to employ the qualitative method because I wanted to ask the veterans in-depth-questions about themselves, their background, how their pre-deployment schooling was and how that really prepared them to live and work among the Afghan people. Although I am just interviewing a small selection of veterans, I get to know a lot about the relations they made with the US Army, with Afghan soldiers and the Afghan civilians. These *relations*, and how the soldiers are prepared to make them, are the center of this thesis. Also, the veterans' stories about their relations are repeated to me, in a new relation: "All interactions between people bring with them new impulses and major or minor changes for all those involved."¹⁰⁸ This is an intricate process where new contexts bring forth new changes. The least entity one can study in qualitative oriented research, is something that is more than one person¹⁰⁹, therefore, I will claim that my research can provide information about more than the specific individuals presented in this thesis.

So in my opinion, fieldwork with qualitative interviews was the method best fit to answer my research question. In a way, the research question chose the research method.

3.4 Finding my informants

The criterions I sat for the informants were that 1) they had to be or have been a part of the US Army and not some other branch of the military, and 2) they had to have served in Afghanistan, not any other country.

¹⁰⁸ Tafjord 2006: 257. My translation.

¹⁰⁹ Fossåskaret 1997:18-19. My translation.

The reason for choosing the US Army, and not some other branch of the military, is that the Army is the branch that moves in to maintain control in an area. The US Marines are more of an attack-force that moves in quickly, secures an area, and then moves on.¹¹⁰ Since I wanted to take a look at how soldiers were prepared to understand the Afghan's religion, it was best to interview veterans from the US Army, which is the branch that stays the longest and where it is arguably most important for the soldiers to know the culture well in order to communicate with the locals.

The reason why I chose Afghanistan and not for example Iraq, is that the war in Afghanistan is not over when I'm writing this thesis, so the topic of the soldiers' training is still current. Also, General Stanley McChrystal publicly announced in 2009 that it was imperative that the US won the Afghans' hearts and minds: "If the people are against us, we cannot be successful. If the people view us as occupiers and the enemy, we can't be successful and our casualties will go up dramatically."¹¹¹ In no other war that the US have been involved in, has the goal of successful interaction between the local population and US soldiers been so explicitly articulated as the war in Afghanistan. Given my research question that focuses on the part of the soldiers' schooling that enables them to better understand local religious traditions, a big part of culture in Afghanistan, I wanted to take a closer look at this particular war.

I did not know anyone in the US when I moved here, so I had to start from scratch when it came to gathering informants. I started my quest for informants by contacting the military attaché at the Norwegian Embassy in Washington DC. His efficiency and willingness to help was overwhelming, I contacted him by e-mail and received a phone call within 5 minutes! We decided that I should come visit him at the Embassy, which I did in April 2010. Our meeting was very productive; he told me a bit about the situation in Afghanistan and gave me contact information for people in the US Army TRADOC (Training and Doctrine Command).

At the outset, I planned to contact TRADOC and get information about pre-deployment schooling from them. I also figured the officers there could get me in touch with veterans who

¹¹⁰ "Difference between Army and Marines" *DifferenceBetween.net*.

¹¹¹ "U.S. must win Afghan hearts and minds, commander says" *CNN Politics*, 2009.

would be willing to give me an interview. The initial contact with TRADOC made it seem that they were more than willing to help me. After a while the person I had corresponded with got re-deployed and his successor did not answer my requests. Maybe that was just as well, because I then decided that I would not use the elite of the US Army to find my informants. The veterans who would most likely provide the most open, honest and independent answers to my questions, were probably the veterans I could find on my own, through other channels.

After the visit in Washington DC, I started out going to my local Veterans' Department right next to my house; a place which is always surrounded with veterans. I soon learned that none of them had served in Afghanistan (at least, none that they would tell me about). I spoke with the director, who could inform me that many young veterans suffer from PTSD¹¹² and are afraid that if they seek help at the Veteran's Department, they will have a hard time getting jobs later on, since they believe future potential employers will then question their mental stability. There are also many veterans who are not aware of what rights they have and who do not seek help from any organization. So basically, many of the veterans are hard to find, because they go back to their lives as civilians without seeking support from their local Veterans' Department.

However, many of the veterans are members of some kind of organization, so I started searching online and found different veteran's organizations. I emailed or called about 20 different organizations, but had little luck finding informants. The organizations either did not have members who had served in Afghanistan, or they did not know of anyone who they thought would be willing to grant me an interview. Many justified this by saying that the mental impacts from the war were still too fresh or too hurtful. Also, most of these organizations have a confidentiality clause that prohibits them from giving out any information concerning their members. Even if they would happen to know someone who fit my criterions, they would not be able to name that person for me. The only thing they could do for me, which some of the organizations did, was to send out e-mails containing my project description and contact information to their members and ask that anyone willing to help would contact me. This sounded good in the beginning, but I got only two informant using this method (I actually got three replies, but one of them had served in Iraq so he did not match my criterions). I concluded

¹¹² Post Traumatcal Stress Disorder

that it takes more to answer an impersonal request when you get an email sent out to many people than if you are asked directly.

I also tried social networks like Facebook, where I found online groups for veterans, and left a few messages there, asking if anyone would be interested in participating in my thesis. I did not get any replies through Facebook. I then put an advertisement on Craigslist¹¹³, saying I needed informants for my Master's Thesis. One man replied to my Craigslist advertisement, but he was from the Marines, which is a branch of the military with a different mission and a different training compared to the Army.

The US Military is very visible in society here, and whenever there would be a demonstration or a support rally or some kind of public happening where the military was involved, I would be there and talk to the veterans and present my project. All the people I met were so accommodating and listened attentively to my explaining this thesis, but again, they were not themselves veterans from *Afghanistan* and they were not allowed to hand out the contact information of other veterans. It was interesting to see, however, that on many occasions when I spoke to veterans from Vietnam or Korea or other wars, they would take great interest in my project and say that similar projects should be made about the wars they served in. Many veterans from other wars, especially the older veterans, said they would love to be interviewed about their own experiences and their own lack of pre-deployment schooling on the country they got sent to. So it became evident to me that at least in the past, there *has* been a lack of preparation when it comes to knowledge about the society the soldiers served in.

I also struggled to find informants close to where I live in Florida, since I believe that with this kind of research method, it is best to be able to meet the informant face to face. A lot is said without words in a conversation. However, I only succeeded in finding one veteran living in Central Florida who would meet me. I did not have the funding to travel all across this vast nation, so the rest of the interviews were made over the telephone or via Skype. I found Skype to

¹¹³ **Craigslist** is a centralized network of online communities, featuring free online classified advertisements – with sections devoted to jobs, housing, personals, for sale, services, community, gigs, résumés, and discussion forums. Except from the discussion forums, the community focus, and the fact that it is free to all users, Craigslist is much like the Norwegian “finn.no”.

be a good way of doing interviews when I was unable to meet the informant personally, because by using the computer cameras, we were able to see each other and talk. After the first couple of minutes where we “meet” and adjust the cameras and microphones, my experience was that it almost felt like we were in the same room.

The fact that I did not get to meet all my informants was unfortunate because I could not be in the same room and feel the atmosphere, interpret their body language or facial expressions, which can sometimes say just as much, or more, than words. On the other side, it was also fortunate, since I then got in touch with people from different parts of the country, which made for a more varied cultural and geographical background in my selection of veterans. I am not sure if it is correct to label them a “selection” since I found so few informants that I could not be very selective regarding who I interviewed. I am still very satisfied with the result. All of them are veterans from the US Army, and they served in Afghanistan at different stages of the war. They also had different rankings in the Army, and I consider it advantageous for the thesis to gather perspectives from people of varied rankings as well.

In the end, I managed to find four informants, but it was a time consuming process. I still want to mention that all the veteran’s organizations I have been in contact with, have been very accommodating and helpful, no exceptions. I also found out that one of my neighbors here in Florida is actually an Afghanistan veteran. He was not willing to talk about his experiences from the war at all, due to the enormous mental impact they had on him. For me, that illustrates how difficult the process of finding informants really was. I knew there were veterans living so close, but yet they were so unreachable, even though I have found most Americans to be very open and willing to share their experiences with me. That really made me realize how sensitive of an issue the war is to the veterans.

3.5 Preparing for the interviews

After I had found veterans who were willing to grant me an interview with them, the next step was preparing the interviews. I chose to apply a semi-structured approach where I have 24 questions divided into 4 categories.

The semi-structured interview is a middle way between a very structured interview where all the questions and topics are pre-determined, and a more structure-free, looser kind of interviewing where the informants more or less decide what they want to discuss. This semi-structured form of interview provided me with four main topics that I was sure to cover, and many questions that I could choose to employ as I saw fitting, depending on how much information the veterans shared spontaneously. However, I permitted myself not to follow this interview guide to the letter. I was talking with real people, whose stories and way of telling them were different. Sometimes our interview took slightly different directions than what I had planned, which I let happen. I took the advice proscribed by Trochim (2006):

Be flexible in your inquiry of people in context. Rather than approaching measurement with the idea of constructing a fixed instrument or set of questions, allow the questions to emerge and change as you become familiar with what you are studying.¹¹⁴

I tried to stay within the main categories of my interview guide, but was more flexible when it came to asking specific questions. The main categories in my interview guide are as follows:

- 1) *The veterans' background, education and upbringing.* Here I am trying to get an idea about who these veterans are and where they come from. Were they raised into a specific religion? Are they and their parents American citizens? What motivated them to join the US Army? An important question in this section is how they experienced the 9/11 attacks. These attacks launched the GWOT, and they were the first attacks of such a grand scale carried out by Muslim terrorists on US soil. I hypothesize that these attacks will contribute to the way US soldiers form their perception of Muslim extremists, and probably also Muslims in general.

¹¹⁴ "The Qualitative Debate" Trochim:2006.

- 2) *The veterans' level of knowledge about Afghanistan, their culture and religion before the schooling in the US Army.* What did they know about Afghanistan; did they know anything at all? Did they know that Afghanistan was a Muslim country? What did they know about Islam? I think these questions will establish their level of knowledge and therefore they can also tell us how competent the soldiers may have been to communicate and cooperate with Afghan Muslims. There are many personal factors that decide whether or not you have what it takes to interact with people in conflicts like this war, but a basic level of knowledge about "the other" usually facilitates a good communication.
- 3) *The pre-deployment schooling these veterans received in the Army.* How extensive was it, and what did they actually learn? We know they must have training on different types of weapons, procedures, radio and other equipment, but what did they learn about religion, the importance of religion in Afghanistan, and the way religion is expressed in an Afghan culture? The training the soldiers get in this department will have a lot to say about how prepared they were to interact with Afghans, and also how prepared the Army meant they should be. What did the Army think was enough schooling? This will show how sensitive of an issue culture and religion was to Army leaders of that time.
- 4) *The veterans' experiences in the field.* Were they prepared for what they faced in Afghanistan? Did they think that their Army training was useful? Did they feel they received enough schooling on religion, moral traditions and customs? How was the cooperation between Afghans and Americans, how did they perceive each other, and was it anything like what the veterans had expected? What do they now think about Afghanistan and Islam? Here I want to hear if the veterans experienced anything that made them see how helpful their schooling was, or if they had incidents where they think it would have been useful to know more.

Later, I will employ these same categories in my analysis.

3.6 The informants

Here follows a quick presentation of the gathering of my informants one by one, and the execution of our interview. The veterans will be presented further in the next chapter; here the focus is how we got in contact, what method we chose for our communication and how the interview situation worked out. I used a digital recorder to tape my interviews with the informants' consent. I transcribed the interviews as soon as I could after they were done, and I gave the veterans new names so their identities would remain anonymous. Then I deleted the recordings, as stated in my application to get this research approved by the NSD¹¹⁵.

“Brad” is 43 years old and comes from South Carolina. I found this veteran's name through a newspaper that wrote about a veteran's organization. I wrote him an email and got a reply from his wife, saying he would probably like to help me out. She gave me another email address with which I got in contact with him. Brad was more than willing to help me, and we scheduled a date for the interview. He lives in Florida and invited me to come to the office where he worked, so we were able to do the interview face to face. His office was in my opinion a good place to do the interview, since it was a familiar place for Brad where he could feel comfortable. It was also a closed room where no one could hear what we said or interrupt us.

“Justin” is 28 years old and comes from North Carolina. This veteran was also found through a veteran's organization. I wrote an email to an organization called the Farmer Veteran Coalition. The person answering my emails was very efficient and eager to help me, but because of their confidentiality clause he could not give me any names. He forwarded my request to about 65 of their most active veterans, of whom 30 of them met my requirements. His thought was that the members who did not meet my requirements might know someone who did. Out of so many people, I got one reply. He lived far away and did not have Skype, so we decided to do the interview by phone. It was not ideal that we could not see each other, but still the conversation floated well and he provided me with a lot of very useful and interesting information. I made the mistake of calling him from my phone and recording the interview, and it turned out afterwards that the recorded sound from my phone speakers was very bad. I spent a

¹¹⁵ Norwegian Social Science Data Services, or “Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste” in Norwegian.

lot of time transcribing his interview since I had to rewind many times to hear which words he used.

“Will” is 35 years old and comes from Arkansas. I wrote an email to an organization called Veterans For Peace where I described myself as a student and gave a short presentation of my Master’s Thesis and my research question, asking if they knew any veterans who would be willing to share their experiences with me. I got a reply from a woman saying that veterans who are willing to talk about their experiences are hard to come by. However, this woman could think of one veteran who she felt certain would like to talk to me, and gave me his email address. I then wrote him an email to which he replied that he would be glad to help. We spent a lot of time trying to find a date where we could meet. Originally, he was going to be in Central Florida at a certain time, so we first planned to meet in person. His plans changed a bit, and in the end we decided to do the interview by Skype. He had never used Skype before, but it went very well. We both had cameras so we could see each other. Since we could not meet in person, Skype was the next best thing. Our conversation floated very well and lasted longer than anticipated, and from that I drew the conclusion that Will felt comfortable speaking with me through Skype.

“Mike” is 35 years old and from New York. After having asked so many organizations and almost given up finding more informants, I told a friend from New York about my thesis. It turned out she knew a veteran who had served in Afghanistan and she put me in contact with Mike. I was not able to meet with Mike, so we did another phone interview. This time I had learned from my previous mistake with Justin’s interview, so I called Mike’s phone from Skype so I could use my laptop’s speakers to record our conversation. That turned out great.

Again, not being able to see each other was less than ideal. Our interview lasted shorter than the other ones, and I do not know if that was due to the phone situation or if Mike was just not as talkative and elaborate as some of the other informants. I suspect it was a little of both.

These veterans come from different places and have different backgrounds. They also served in different places in Afghanistan and at various stages of the war. Among my informants

you find both Commissioned and Non-Commissioned Officers and Privates¹¹⁶. I gathered information from a wide specter of veterans and at different stages of the war, and saw how their stories matched and differed. You can read more about these veterans and the actual material I got from them in the next chapter.

3.7 Language

I spent some time wondering if this thesis should be written in my native language, Norwegian, or in English. Obviously, I ended up writing in English, much due to the fact that an interview through the transcription loses its context and becomes a decontextualized conversation: “While the interview is a conversation which develops between two parties, the transcriptions are frozen in time and removed from the foundation in a social interaction”¹¹⁷.

An interview contains so much more than the words that are said. Sounds are uttered, facial expressions are made, and the atmosphere in the room is difficult or impossible to put on paper. In a conversation, there is more than the dialogue and the people conversing. There is a “linguistic and cultural context, in addition to more or less extrinsic factors that steers the conversation”.¹¹⁸

I wanted to reproduce the veterans’ information and their quotes as accurately as possible, and found that writing in English would better enable me to do just that. Their interviews were already decontextualized through transcription, so I did not want to risk altering their statements in any way by translating them to Norwegian as well. Besides, I promised them that they would get to read this thesis if they so wished. The weakness of this choice is that I am not able to express the same nuances in English as I am in Norwegian, and also that the writing process itself became more time consuming. However, I find that writing in English fits best

¹¹⁶ A Commissioned Officer usually has a college degree, often from an officer training program. A Non-Commissioned Officer does not need a degree, (s)he enlists as a Private and works his/her way up to different types of Sergeant rankings. A Private is someone who enlists who is not (yet) an officer. (“Symbols and Insignias” *US Army*) Of my informants, only Brad is a Commissioned Officer.

¹¹⁷ Fonneland 2006:228-229.

¹¹⁸ Olsen 2006:52.

with the inductive method, where the emphasis lies on representing *the informants'* points of view first and foremost.

3.8 Ethical considerations

There are many ethical considerations to ponder when writing a Master's Thesis, and especially with this kind of method, where I use qualitative interviews. The veterans I talked with were all open with me, and shared a lot from an experience that was clearly very difficult for each and every one of them. So first and foremost, I had to tread carefully and with the utmost respect when dealing with this topic. Even though my focus was their knowledge of, and experience with, Afghan religion, and not the battles they were engaged in, they were all under an enormous psychological pressure when serving in the war, and my questions made them think back and recollect memories from a difficult time in their lives.

It is important to remember that the interview situation in this kind of field studies is always asymmetrical and hierarchical. Being the interviewer, I defined the situation and I determined what we were going to talk about. Even though I always listened more than I spoke, it was still me steering our conversations around the questions I needed answered. Being the interviewer was a very humbling experience for me. I got to talk with men who had the courage to enter a conflict that I would physically stay far away from.

Any interview for a thesis at the University of Oslo is required by the NSD to have an informed consent by each of the participants¹¹⁹. This can, according to the NSD, be made orally or in writing. I chose to get their consents orally. This was ethically because I consider an oral consent to be as valid as a written one, and practically because I did not get to meet all the informants face to face, so a written consent would be very time consuming and provide unnecessary extra work.

¹¹⁹ "Forskningsetiske retningslinjer for samfunnsvitenskap, humaniora, juss og teologi" *Forskningsetiske komiteer*, 2006:13

Another thing I considered beforehand was how much I should “dig” into their experiences, dealing with such a sensitive topic. I luckily did not have to think too hard about that when doing the interviews, since the veterans thoroughly answered all of my questions even though I explained to them that they were free to refrain from answering any question and to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Then we have the questions concerning anonymity. How much information should I reproduce about these informants, what was sufficient and what was too much? I chose to state their age, home state, ranking in the US Army and time of service in Afghanistan. Then I chose a random name for the person. Most of the veterans actually said they did not mind being quoted and described with their full names in the thesis, but I still made them anonymous. They probably did not need me to do that, but by doing it this way, I would not have to worry about them changing their minds at a later stage in the process and wanting to be rendered anonymous. Also, it is not of importance to the thesis that the readers know their real names in order to learn from the information they provided. Some of the veterans also mentioned other people by name, whom I especially had to anonymize since I did not have their consent to participate in this study.

Another important ethical consideration I made was how I should inform the participants about my intention with this research project. I did not want to say too much about my opinions about the topic before we did the interview, because I did not want the veterans to please, persuade or provoke me in any way with their answers. The whole idea was for them to express *their* opinions and experiences, and not feeling they should adjust them when talking to me. This is an important matter that should be thought through before going into an interview situation.

When should one share one’s sympathies or antipathies? Tafjord (2006) feels that the person who asks the questions should be prepared to answer questions in return. When those questions are answered, one must be aware that the answers can in turn affect the information given in the interview.¹²⁰ One of my main motivations for doing this project was the shock I got from learning that there once were US soldiers going to Vietnam without knowing anything

¹²⁰ Tafjord 2006:253

about the country. I knew that times had changed since the Vietnam War, and suspected that with the flow of information from the media of today, the soldiers would have more knowledge about what they were getting themselves into, but I did not know for sure. I did not want to tell my informants too much about me doubting that their pre-deployment schooling had serious shortcomings, since I feared they then would either over-emphasize how right I was about that, or they would disagree and exaggerate as to how much they learned in order to prove me wrong.

I ended up being honest and telling them that I chose this topic because I believe religious literacy is of importance when it comes to understanding other people, and that I wanted to find out how their pre-deployment schooling taught them about religion in Afghanistan. I also clearly stated that I had never been in the Army and that *they* were the experts, so I was not there to spread my views and opinions, but to collect theirs. I hope that I in this way was able to express that what I was looking for was their honest answers and opinions, and I believe that was what I got. If they would have phrased their answers differently to another person, remains an unanswered question.

3.9 “The I-factor”

Philosopher Hans Skjervheim thinks that there is a difference between studying cultural matters and matters of natural science. He says that in cultural matters, the relationship between the researcher and what is being studied is a subject-subject relationship, whereas in natural science, the relationship between researcher and what is being studied is more of a subject-object relationship. Being an autonomous and thinking person, the researcher is also a subject, a part of what is being studied.¹²¹

Qualitative fieldwork constructs knowledge through the interaction between researcher and informants.¹²² This thesis is to a great extent based on the information given to me by my informants. As a researcher I had to be reflexive, avoid asking leading questions and not act in a

¹²¹ Skjervheim 1976, in Fonneland 2006:230

¹²² Fonneland 2006:231

dominant way.¹²³ I tried following these guidelines, and feel quite confident that I did not act in a dominant way. Still, what you can read in this thesis will be *my* rendition and *my* interpretation of the interviews, so in a way, my dominance over the thesis is established in the writing process following our conversations.

I was well aware of the fact that how I got along with the informants would impact their willingness to open up to me. I found that it was easier for them to be forthcoming when I met them face to face or when we could see each other via Skype. Interviewing over the telephone gives more room for uncertainty about how the other person reacts to my questions, and the informant has to choose to open up to someone he cannot see. This made it more difficult for me to convey to the informant that I was listening attentively and that I appreciated everything he was willing to share with me. I find that this can easily be said with facial expressions, whereas here I had to talk to express my thoughts.

Avoiding asking leading questions can also be tricky. Sometimes the informants would start telling me something that would match well with my hypothesis, and I had to tread carefully to avoid angling my questions to encourage a specific answer.

Another consideration is how my personality and my appearance and background affected the informants. I am a woman, while all my informants were men, I have not served in the Military, I am not American, and I speak English with a Scandinavian accent. All in all, I am not “one of them”. Would they have answered the questions differently if I were a male and an American veteran myself? And would I then perceive and interpret their answers in a different manner? The answer is yes, most likely. So it is important to have in mind that this thesis is based on a material constructed in a specific setting, with specific people, interpretations and circumstances. I cannot claim to be objective about this matter, neither are my informants.

However, my purpose was never to try to be objective. I just had to be aware of “the I-factor”. The researcher’s participation can be exploited in a positive direction. If you are aware of the dynamical interaction between researcher and informant, you can by taking into

¹²³ *ibid*

consideration the consequence of this, achieve a deeper insight into how knowledge is created.¹²⁴ Repstad (1994) emphasizes *the actor's point of view*. Trying to be objective is futile, but “instead of answering the question “What do I see them do?” the qualitative researcher tries to approach the answer to the question “What do they see themselves doing?””.¹²⁵ This is a process that demands a lot of the researcher. One has to be emphatic, try to put oneself in their place and interpret what they are *actually* saying. This has been challenging for me. I think I am emphatic and able to “read” people quite well, but I will never claim to understand what it means to prepare for, and go through, a war. My research question relates more to the teaching than the actual war, and as a teacher I can relate to that, but the veterans’ opinions and descriptions about the teaching will inextricably be linked to their experiences in war. The findings from this fieldwork have to be linked to lived experience: “Cultural studies recognize that all knowledge claims are “situated” claims in that they arise out of certain social/historical/cultural/personal contexts and therefore represent particular and necessarily partial perspectives.”¹²⁶

As a conclusion to my handling of “the I-factor”, I spent time preparing myself mentally before the interviews and was always aware of my subjectivity in this process. Still, my interpretations will be affected by the fact that it is impossible to be objective when it comes to qualitative studies of human beings.

3.10 The impossibility of objectivity

Max Muller and Edward Tiele can be considered the founders of the academic study of religion as a “science”. From the 1890’s until modern times, their ideas of objectivity were by most scholars taken for granted.¹²⁷ Today, the situation has changed, and many scholars recognize that it is no such thing as complete objectivity, at least not when it comes to social studies. Ethically, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to justify using persons as a tool, or a means to an end. A person should always be an end in themselves. According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “To treat a person as if he or she were an object, or anything pertaining to the

¹²⁴ *ibid*:232

¹²⁵ Repstad 1994:13, in Fonneland 2006:234

¹²⁶ Moore 2007:79

¹²⁷ Dunbar, 1998:3

human as if it were only an object, is, besides being immoral, to misunderstand him or her or it; it constitutes an intellectual error”¹²⁸. Smith claims that we are all humans, and a human is by nature subjective. We cannot step out of our own humanity, therefore it is impossible to be objective. He also talks about how treating persons as objects may create tensions between groups, “because objective knowledge is predicated on the duality of subject and object, inculcating an “us vs. them” mentality”.¹²⁹

Søren Kierkegaard also talks about the impossibility of objectivity. He claims that humans are subjective beings who cannot exist on the outside of ourselves. He says that whoever tries to step outside of his own thoughts and be objective, actually attempts to cease being human.¹³⁰

In my research, I knew I would not be able to be completely objective, so rather than striving to be objective, I tried to be aware of my subjectivity from the beginning. Nevertheless, even though I recognized the danger of the “us vs. them” mentality that Smith discusses, I also knew that in reality, there would be a distinction between me and my informants. As earlier mentioned, I was not one of the veterans, nor could I ever be. All I could do, was to try my best to represent *their* stories, *their* opinions and *their* feelings in an inductive manner, and at the same time be aware that in this thesis, all they told me is analyzed by a subjective human being – me.

3.11 Troubleshooting

Entering the world of qualitative method has been very educative for me. Cultural studies are at the same time both very challenging and very rewarding. At first, I had a hard time grasping what I could really claim to be true in my findings by employing this kind of method. When it is impossible to remain neutral and objective, and the whole thesis will be affected by my own interpretations, does that render all the knowledge gathered here relative? Can we then

¹²⁸ Smith 1981:58 in Dunbar 1998:3-4

¹²⁹ Smith 1981:71 in Dunbar 1998:4

¹³⁰ Skjervheim 1976:178

call it knowledge at all? What can we really claim is true about the veterans' schooling? It took some time to comprehend this, but these words from Donna Haraway were a good guide:

(...) the alternative to relativism is not totalization and single vision, which is always finally the unmarked category whose power depend on systematic narrowing and obscuring. The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. (...) it is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective enquiry rests.¹³¹

In other words, the only thing I can claim is true is my own interpretation of the material provided to me by my informants. I am in this thesis presenting to you a partial perspective of the pre-deployment schooling of American soldiers in the US Army going to Afghanistan. And since cultural studies, according to Moore and Haraway, are all about partial perspectives, I can claim that my thesis has contributing value to society even though it cannot present all perspectives.

There are both strengths and weaknesses about how I proceeded to find my material in this thesis. Had I been a more experienced researcher, I might have done a few things differently, like starting earlier with gathering informants and being more realistic as to how easy it would be to find them. One weakness with this study is that I never got the chance to pick and choose from many willing informants; I had to go with the ones who agreed to participate. Therefore, I did not have the luxury of being able to create a very homogeneous or heterogeneous group of veterans when it comes to geography, age, rank or background. However, I am very satisfied with the informants who *were* willing to participate. They all provided important and different perspectives when it comes to their pre-deployment schooling, and they opened up to me and were willing to help a stranger. Interviewing them has been a very humbling experience, and I do not take their participation for granted.

In the process of writing this thesis, I have learned much about religious literacy, Afghanistan, religion in the US and the US Army. Mostly, I have learned again that people are different and that, even though we are strongly influenced by our society, we all see the world in

¹³¹ Haraway 1991:191 in Moore 2007:80

our own, unique way. There is no such thing as 100% objective knowledge, and especially in research where *people* are the objects, there are always many nuances to the picture.

People's beliefs can be so important to them that their faith is worth fighting and dying for, whether they belong to a religious community or not. I think that in every conflict, and especially in war, both parties need to seek to understand each other's partial perspectives. "To deny or minimize the realities and the perspectives of the Other is to maximize the likelihood of misunderstanding, conflict, and incomplete knowledge."¹³²

¹³² Myers 2008:26

4 Pre-deployment Schooling and Experiences in the Field

4.1 Introduction

As described in the previous chapter, I have interviewed four US Army veterans who have served in Afghanistan in order to answer my research question. I have employed the semi-structured interview guide presented in the previous chapter, where my questions have revolved around these four main categories:

- 1. The veterans' background, with an emphasis on their religious background, education and experience of 9/11*
- 2. Their knowledge about Afghanistan and Islam before the Army schooling*
- 3. The schooling they received pre-deployment concerning Afghan religion*
- 4. Their experiences in Afghanistan and evaluation of how the pre-deployment preparation worked in the field.*

In this following chapter, I will present my findings. First, there is a general introduction to the human dimension of war and, more specifically, American war. Religion and spirituality proves to be important for soldiers, commanding officers and top politicians during times of war. The US Army acknowledges that their soldiers need to be both physically and mentally fit to go to war. I will later ask the question if these veterans would say they were mentally prepared to live and work in the Afghan society. Before introducing my informants, you will also find a timeline with important events in the war in Afghanistan, to place the veteran's time of service in context.

So here follows a general introduction, a timeline, a presentation of the veterans, their interviews and their own evaluation of the pre-deployment schooling, and a summary at the end.

4.2 The human dimension of warfare

Modern times brought with it new and amazing technical discoveries. For every war fought, man has seen the need for improvement in the technical and weapons department. Our two World Wars have given us many technical discoveries and new weapons, culminating in the atom bomb. Today, war is fought in a radically different way from only a hundred years ago. We

have an extensive body of international law concerning how to wage war, rules of warfare and how the warring parties should treat each other once war has ended. Non-lethal weapons have been developed, and soldiers need not be in close proximity to the enemy in order to eliminate him as a threat. Much has changed, still, one factor remains the same – the human factor:

What battles have in common is human: the behavior of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honor and the achievement of some aim over which other men are ready to kill them. The study of battle is therefore always a study of fear and usually of courage; always of leadership, usually of obedience; always of compulsion, sometimes of insubordination; always of anxiety, sometimes of elation or catharsis; always of violence, sometimes also of cruelty, self-sacrifice, compassion; above all, it is always a study of solidarity and usually of disintegration—for it is towards the disintegration of human groups that battle is directed.¹³³

Keegan talks about the disintegration of human groups in war. US General McChrystal stated in 2009 that American troops were supposed to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people.¹³⁴ The reason for this is that the war in Afghanistan is not directed towards the disintegration between the Afghan people and the American people, but towards the disintegration between the Taliban and Al Qaeda on one side, and the Afghan people on the other side. Distinguishing an Afghan extremist from a peaceful Afghan citizen is no easy task for Americans, and a lot easier for Afghans. The success of the Americans' operations in Afghanistan relies therefore heavily on intelligence from, and cooperation with, Afghans. Many Afghans joined the Taliban due to extreme poverty, and this war is not only about catching terrorists of today, but also about preventing new people from the radicalization that goes on in extremist circles in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The danger the American troops face is being unable to interact with the Afghan people, or worse, that the war will contribute to a further disintegration between Afghans and Americans. No weapons or technological discoveries can ever solve this problem. Being able to impact the “human terrain” continues to be of utmost importance for the outcome of this war and all wars. “The ability to navigate human terrain gives you better intelligence, better bomb-targeting data, and access to what is essentially a public relations campaign for the allegiance of the

¹³³ Keegan 1977:298

¹³⁴ General McChrystal on “60 Minutes” CBS, 2009.

populace”¹³⁵, wrote Sebastian Junger. He also gives an example of an incident where the Taliban burned down a school in the Korengal, and by accident also burned a box full of Qurans. The villagers were outraged by this, and the Taliban control over the human terrain got weakened¹³⁶.

4.3 American spirituality in warfare

There can be no doubt as to the fact that war is intense. It is quite literally a matter of life and death, which brings forth many thoughts about spirituality, God, and the life hereafter, according to soldiers who have been to war. Here is a telling example from WWII:

A personal illustration is when I was in WWII, a rough and tough paratrooper facing death. I drew upon that element of ‘spirituality’ that had been a part of me from my birth. I had not remembered confirmation before this when things were going good. Nor had I thought of the times my mother had taken me to church to sit through the boring sermons. Little did I know what I was becoming through those years. I was a tough platoon sergeant and had whipped most of my men from time to time and could drink more beer than most. We were facing a dangerous parachute jump. As we sat around being briefed I asked a question, “Do any of you guys pray before your jump?” Of course I got no answer nor did I expect to. I just saw a bunch of bowed heads.¹³⁷

In the US, religion (civil religion, if you will) is closely linked to the US Military. Cars have bumper stickers saying things like “God bless our troops” or “Chosen by God to serve a higher purpose” with the yellow ribbon attached.¹³⁸ Just recently I saw a mother with a T-shirt that read “My son is a US Marine” on the front, and “God bless America” on the back.

Leading officers of the US Armed Forces realize that their soldiers must not only be fit physically, but also spiritually. The Chaplain’s responsibility is to enhance spiritual fitness by drawing moral fortitude from well-known spiritual values that the US Army values are compatible with. The soldiers’ religious denomination and affiliation is not of great importance, but they are encouraged to believe in a higher power and noble purpose with their service. In war, soldiers are asked to go far from their home and step out of their comfort zone in an extremely radical and challenging way, and the thought that they are not alone and that their

¹³⁵ Junger 2011:43

¹³⁶ *ibid*:43-44

¹³⁷ Quote from a telephone interview in Bailey 2003:7

¹³⁸ The yellow ribbon is a symbol of support to the American troops, like the pink ribbon is a symbol of support for the fight against breast cancer.

service will not be forgotten, is comforting. America has rituals to ensure that even the ones who are killed in war and never found or identified still get honored in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. On the inscription of the tomb it reads, “Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God.”¹³⁹

4.4 Timeline of the War in Afghanistan¹⁴⁰

Sept 9, 2001: Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance, is assassinated by Al Qaeda.

Sept 11, 2001: Al Qaeda attacks the US. Four planes crash into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania. Almost 3000 people are killed. None of the 19 hijackers are Afghans, but Afghanistan is the base for the Al Qaeda. President Bush demands that the Taliban regime delivers the leaders of Al Qaeda to the US.

Oct 7, 2001: Operation Enduring Freedom is launched by the US and the UK. Other countries pledge future support. First, air strikes are carried out. Ground forces arrive 12 days later.

Nov 2001: The Taliban regime is in retreat. On Nov 14, the UN calls for a “central role” in establishing a transitional administration in Afghanistan.

Dec 5, 2001: Different Afghan factions (like the Northern Alliance, but not the Taliban), invited by the UN, sign the Bonn Agreement where Hamid Karzai is appointed head of the interim administration. Following this agreement, the ISAF is established.

Dec 9, 2001: This is the date generally associated with the Taliban collapse.

Dec 2001: Bin Laden was tracked by Afghan militias to the Tora Bora cave complex. Many die in the two-week battle at Tora Bora, but Bin Laden escapes. The US was later criticized for not being more involved in this battle.

¹³⁹ Bailey 2003:6

¹⁴⁰ All of the timeline is adapted from: “U.S. War in Afghanistan” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2011.

Apr 17, 2002: President Bush gives a speech where he says the US will engage in “helping to build an Afghanistan that is free from this evil and is a better place in which to live”.

May 1, 2003: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld states that the major combats are believed to be over. Only 8000 US soldiers are in Afghanistan at that time.

Aug 2003: NATO assumes control of ISAF in Afghanistan. 5000 ISAF troops are stationed in the beginning, while the number increases to 65.000 in 2006.

Jan 2004: 502 Afghan delegates agree on a constitution for Afghanistan with a strong presidential system intended to unite the country’s ethnic groups.

Oct 9, 2004: Hamid Karzai is democratically elected president. His opponents accuse him of fraud.

May 23, 2005: Presidents Karzai and Bush issue a joint declaration declaring the countries as strategic partners. The US is to help Afghans rebuild their countries and train Afghan security forces.

2006: Fighting increases in Afghanistan. The number of suicide attacks increases from 27 in 2005 to 139 in 2006.

Aug 22, 2008: Collateral killings by the US increase, which the Taliban use to claim that coalition forces are unable to protect the population.

Feb 19, 2009: President Obama announces that 17.000 more US troops are to be deployed to Afghanistan. In January 2009, there were 37.000 US troops divided between US and NATO commands. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates says the mission in Afghanistan is “too broad” and calls for establishing limited goals.

Mar 27, 2009: Obama says that the Al Qaeda must also be defeated in Pakistan. An additional 4000 soldiers are to be deployed.

Apr 2009: Responding to a call by US military officials, NATO nations promise to step up their engagement in Afghanistan. An additional 5000 troops are to be deployed from NATO nations.

May 11, 2009: Gen David D. McKiernan is replaced by Gen Stanley A. McChrystal. The Secretary of Defense says the Pentagon needs “fresh thinking” and “fresh eyes” in Afghanistan.

June 23, 2010: Gen McChrystal is relieved of Afghan Command after having criticized the administration, and is replaced by Gen Petraeus.

Nov 2010: NATO members sign a declaration stating that full responsibility for Afghanistan is to be handed over to Afghan forces by the end of 2014. The transition process is set to begin in July 2011, and coincides with a drawdown in the 100,000 US troops stationed in Afghanistan at that time. Many are concerned about whether the Afghan forces are ready to assume control.

4.5 The informants

As described in the previous chapter, I had great difficulties finding informants. However, these four veterans were willing and able to help me out. Here comes a short introduction to each one of them, so it will be easier to tell them apart in the following sections. I will present them chronologically after when I interviewed them. The names by which they are presented in this thesis are not their real names, in accordance with NSD’s rules that their real identity must remain hidden. I chose to make them anonymous by giving them common American names.

“**Brad**” was the first person who was willing to participate in my study, and he was also the only one I was lucky enough to meet face to face. Brad got deployed to Afghanistan in 2006 and is the highest ranking soldier in the thesis. He served as a Captain¹⁴¹ in Afghanistan.

Brad considers himself a Christian. He had a Catholic upbringing, but found his “spiritual home” in a Presbyterian church with his wife when they got married. He was 43 years old at the time we did the interview in 2010.

Before enlisting in 1993, Brad had finished one year of college. He later got out of the Army as enlisted personnel, then went to an Officer School and became a Commissioned Officer. While in the Army, he was able to finish his degree.

¹⁴¹ A Captain “Commands and controls company-sized units (62 to 190 Soldiers), together with a principal NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] assistant. Instructs skills at service schools and The United States Army combat training centers and is often a Staff Officer at the battalion level.” (“Symbols and Insignias” *US Army*)

In Afghanistan, Brad was “all over the place”, he travelled a lot and visited many places where people spoke different languages and dialects. He was responsible for a group made up of both American and Afghan soldiers, and had an Afghan interpreter who he really got along with.

Brad is very friendly and easy to talk with. He is open, yet professional, and he told me many stories and showed me photos he had prepared from Afghanistan. It was great to start by interviewing him, since we met face to face and he really illustrated the war for me with these photos. That enabled me to better imagine how it is to be a soldier in Afghanistan.

In many of the photos, there were people that Brad told me stories about; funny stories, stories of heroic acts, or examples of the camaraderie they shared. Then, in many cases, Brad would tell me how the people in the photos got killed. Talking with Brad was a very humbling experience.

“Justin” is from North Carolina, and he is 28 years old. I got in touch with him through an organization that kindly conveyed my request for informants to their members, upon which he answered he would like to help. We did our interview by telephone, which was not ideal, but fortunately he managed to open up and answer all my questions even though he could not see the person he was talking to.

Justin was in Afghanistan from 2003-2004 and got an honorable discharge from the Army in 2005. He served as a Private First Class¹⁴² in Afghanistan.

He was raised Methodist and went to boy scouts and church in his youth. His family also traveled a lot, but not outside North America. He finished high school and started college, but he dropped out a few weeks prior to 9/11. It was interesting how he divided his life into pre- and post-9/11 before I had mentioned 9/11 at all.

It was a bit hard for Justin to remember all the details surrounding his training since it was close to ten years ago, but he strived to answer all my questions the best he could. He seemed to me a very friendly, open and humble guy. One who tries to be positive and see the best in different people and situations. I do not know if he would recognize himself in what I just described, but that was the impression I was left with after our telephone conversation anyway.

¹⁴² “PV2s [Privates] are promoted to this level after one year—or earlier by request of supervisor. Individual can begin BCT [Basic Combat Training] at this level with experience or prior military training. Carries out orders issued to them to the best of his/her ability.” (“Symbols and Insignias” *US Army*)

“Will” is from Arkansas and happily described himself as a southern hillbilly. Both his parents are Americans, and he grew up on a chicken farm. He is 35 years old and served in Afghanistan in 2002 and then again in 2003-2004. He also served in Uzbekistan just a few weeks after 9/11 2001. He was a Sergeant¹⁴³ in the Army, and worked with explosives.

In his own words, he had very little education before joining and little understanding of the world. He dropped out of high school and later got into a program called “job corps” in Texas where he learned a trade in electronics. After his service in the Army, he has gone to two different colleges in Arkansas. I do not know if it was in college he got such an extended vocabulary (by my standard at least) or if he has read a lot on his own, but I must have learned at least ten new words from our conversation. For being a hillbilly, as he described himself, he sure is an eloquent one.

We spoke via Skype where we could both see the other, and this proved to be a very good means of communication. Will was very easy to talk with; he was open and had much to say about the war, the Army, Afghanistan and his experiences there. His interview lasted longer than the other ones, approximately 1,5 hours.

Will had a great sense of humor even in this conversation where the topic was pretty serious, and I think he smiled throughout the entire interview.

“Mike”, 35 years old from New York, was the last veteran I interviewed. I got in touch with him through a friend in New York, and we did a phone interview not long ago. I am very glad I got to speak with him, since he served in 2008 and part of 2009, which makes him the only veteran I have spoken with who served after Brad in 2006. Mike served as a Specialist¹⁴⁴ in the war.

Mike had, according to himself, a pretty average upbringing in New York. He played a lot of sports, dated cheerleaders and finished high school. He did not take any additional education or belong to any religious community.

¹⁴³ A Sergeant “Typically commands a squad (9 to 10 Soldiers). Considered to have the greatest impact on Soldiers because SGTs oversee them in their daily tasks. In short, SGTs set an example and the standard for Privates to look up to, and live up to.” (“Symbols and Insignias” *US Army*)

¹⁴⁴ A Specialist “Can manage other enlisted Soldiers of lower rank. Has served a minimum of two years and attended a specific training class to earn this promotion. People enlisting with a four year college degree can enter BCT as a Specialist.” (“Symbols and Insignias” *US Army*)

In Afghanistan, he was based in the eastern part of Afghanistan, where most of the fighting occurs. His motivation for joining the Army was what happened on 9/11.

Our interview was the shortest. Mike did not elaborate much; he provided short and concise replies to my questions. He did not require a lot of time to think about the answers either, his mind was set and his replies came fast. I guess New Yorkers in general speak faster than people in the South. However, Mike happily answered all my questions and was very forthcoming.

The war memories were relatively fresh in Mike's mind, and he seemed very frustrated with the whole situation. So were the other veterans, but to me, Mike seemed to see less hope in it all. Will and Mike were two opposite poles in this study. They both carried a lot of frustration with them from the war, but while Will was mostly frustrated with the US Army, Mike was frustrated with the Afghans.

4.6 Baggage

The background we have defines us. In order to learn the perspectives of others, we must first examine and interrogate our own perspective. As previously stated in this thesis, there is no such thing as objective knowledge. All knowledge is perceived and interpreted by humans, and we see things through different lenses. What we accept as reality is determined by this fact, and it is important to acknowledge that we are only capable to experience the world in our own subjective manner. That said, even though each individual has its own way of experiencing something, we interpret the world in the terms propagated by the society into which we have been socialized. Our realities are socially constructed.¹⁴⁵ When we meet with people from other cultures, our perception and ability to communicate with them will largely be determined by the baggage we bring along in our lives; the way we have interpreted our own society, and the way society has formed us. This explains why an American and say an Iranian could meet with the exact same people in Afghanistan, under the exact same circumstances, and experience it totally differently. It also explains why it is important to know about the background of my informants.

¹⁴⁵ Myers 2008:29

All the informants are men who are born and raised in the US. Brad from South Carolina was adopted, and Will from Arkansas has a mother who is adopted, but they are all from the US and American citizens. They all answered yes when I asked them if they had an American background and upbringing, and Brad wished to emphasize that he has a *Southern American* background. Will said he had a very typical rural, *Southern* life.

One study aiming to examine culture in the South led to these conclusions: “Politically, people in the South tend to reject gun control, favor capital punishment, corporal punishment and the building of a strong, national defense”¹⁴⁶. Stereotyping like this can influence both the people who are being stereotyped and the ones on the outside, hearing about them, and they can affect the way we perceive ourselves and others. Another recent statistics claims the religious literacy rate is slightly lower in the South¹⁴⁷, even though the South is considered to be more religious than the North. People from the big cities in the North have a reputation of being more stressed and direct, which, again, can contribute to them behaving in that way.

Now, if the statistics are right concerning Southerners favoring a strong, national defense, there are clearly cultural aspects in the South that would support a strong retaliation after 9/11. However, these are generalizations, and in my thesis, I found that the one who expressed the strongest will to retaliate and get justice after the 9/11 attacks, was from the North. He comes from New York, and was geographically closest to the attack on the Twin Towers, which may or may not have contributed to those feelings.

The informants all had their reasons for joining the Army. Brad and Will had already enlisted prior to 9/11. Will was only 19, young and adventurous, and he wanted to feel like he had earned his citizenship. Brad and Justin both had fathers who served, and particularly Brad came from a family with a military background, where his grandfather was part of the storming of Iwo Jima in WWII. He claimed he and his brothers never experienced any pressure to serve, and joined the Army completely voluntarily. He described his wanting to enlist as a *calling*, and said the military and the opportunity to serve was always close to his heart.

¹⁴⁶ “Is Southern violence due to a culture of honor?” Barber:2009

¹⁴⁷ “U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey” *PewResearchCenter*, 2011.

All three informants from the South mentioned wanting to *serve* their country as one of the primary reasons to enlist. The patriotism, love and sense of responsibility, or maybe duty, towards their nation seemed strong with all of them.

The fourth informant, Mike from New York, did not explicitly mention wanting to serve. He listed one reason, and one reason only, for his joining the Army: the 9/11 attacks.

It seems education was not a key motivator to joining the Army for any of my informants. Some had taken a few college classes before enlisting, and some got more education later on, but in none of the interviews was education listed as a primary motivational factor.

These veterans had different rankings and varied backgrounds. They served in different places in the war and at different stages, so inevitably, they had dissimilar perceptions of both the war and the pre-deployment training. Since the part of the schooling I focus on in this thesis is religion, it was interesting to know some about the veterans' religious background.

4.7 Religious background

When asked about their spirituality and affiliation with religious communities, the informants had different backgrounds. I will present them individually here:

Justin from North Carolina was raised Methodist. He told me he was pretty much raised in church. He used to attend service in church, where his decision to join the Army was supported by the congregation. He is not clear on whether or not he considers himself a religious person any longer. He has opened up to new ideas, and has stopped going to church. However, he still holds his religious upbringing very dearly.

Will from Arkansas grew up in a Southern Baptist community, so he grew up Christian, but he has no religious affiliation at this point in his life. He describes himself as a “deeply spiritual person” though, but says he does not subscribe to any religious theology. When he was in the Army, he clearly devoted some thought to religion's role in war:

I was completely appalled by the resources that the Military pumped in to sustaining theological beliefs in the military. The Military and the terms of which people conduct themselves towards others are not inductive to any kind of religious thought process. You know, there's nothing holy about killing other people. But people go to church on Sunday in the Military like they're doing God's work while they're serving, and that's just completely ridiculous to me. And even while I was in Afghanistan there were Christian churches, black little tents, I guess you could say, where people would go and pray and worship and talk about Jesus on Sundays. You know, he's probably one of the greatest peace activists known to man, Jesus Christ, and they would talk about his great deeds and worship him – in a warzone. It's completely crazy, Jesus did not condone war.

Brad went to a Catholic school from kindergarten to the 12th grade and says he was “blessed with that opportunity”. He describes himself as a “sinful Christian... I'm as devoted as my human mind can devote. I'm very much a believer in Jesus Christ and I'm a Christian.” Brad was born and raised Catholic, and when he met his wife to be, they went “church shopping” and ended up in a Presbyterian church. Their religious community was “ultra supportive” to Brad and his family while he was serving.

Mike's reply to my questions about whether or not he is, or have been, religious, was short and concise: no. He did not get a religious upbringing, did not belong to a religious community and does not consider himself a spiritual person. However, he was raised in the US, where most of the population says they believe in God, and many go to church. On Christianity, Mike said he had nothing against that religion. He does not perceive Christianity as a religion that seeks to dictate how he should live his life, so he does not have any problems with Christians.

4.8 The impact of 9/11

In chapter 2, I theorized that most Americans would probably be able to remember exactly where they were and what they did when the planes hit the Twin Towers. That turned out to be right in the case of all my informants. For Justin, the 9/11 attacks motivated him to enlist. He describes his experience of 9/11 in these words:

I got very concerned and it was just the most shocking thing. I couldn't believe that we were attacked. I worked in a sandwich shop and I remember all the people coming through just stopping and watching the TV, and we could see the terrible things that happened to so many people. I had a close friend who had

enlisted at that time and more friends who got motivated by this attack. And I too wanted to serve my country after this.

Brad said 9/11 was such a scary moment for him. He thought about his family, called his wife and told her to get home so she was safe. The employers at the company where he worked gathered around the TV, and at that time, nobody knew what was going on. Brad uttered the words “Osama bin Laden”, and no one understood what he was talking about. With his military training and background, he knew this was the work of Osama bin Laden. Being in the constructions business, Brad remembers saying “oh my God, I think the tower’s about to fall” and all of a sudden the tower fell and he just felt pain for the service members, the firefighters and the policemen: “all I could see was Americans rushing to the scene to help other Americans, it looked like thousands of people rushing to the scene, to the gates of Hell so to speak, to help other people, and then the tower comes down. And that hurt”.

Brad’s instant reaction was hurt, then that emotion was replaced by wanting justice. And through it all, a further sense of patriotism developed.

Will joined the army in 2000, so his decision to join had nothing to do with 9/11. However, 9/11 made the prospect of going to war much more real to him:

I think 9/11 traumatized our entire nation, to be perfectly honest. The second I heard about it on the radio, I remember exactly where I was, and all of us looked at each other. We were already trained, already in the military and we knew we were going to war, and that was pretty well accepted the second we heard what had happened. And as sociopathic this may sound, everyone was really excited about it, because we constantly trained to go to war, so we would finally get to do our job. So while some people were really upset, I’ll tell you, there were people in the military who got really excited, because they finally got to do the terrible thing they signed up to do. And that was me included, I did feel that way at that time. But for the most part, this scared the shit out of the entire country. And I don’t think this country has actually healed emotionally from that incident yet, as a collective. And I don’t know if we will for generations to come. There’s kids who are just now graduating high school here, who know nothing else but their country at war. That’s how long this has been going on.

The veterans were right that the attacks came as a complete shock to most people, and that what happened September 11 affected the whole nation. In a survey to assess the mental health of Americans where 560 adults in the US were interviewed three to five days after 9/11, these results were uncovered: 44% of the adults showed one or more substantial symptoms of

stress. 90% had one or more symptoms. Throughout the country there were stress symptoms reported. 98% reported they coped with the stress and fear by talking with others, 90% said they turned to religion, 60% participated in group activities and 36% made donations. It showed that people had strong reactions even though they lived far away from the sites where the attacks were carried out. This was due to the media's presentation that these were attacks on America, and a perception that most, if not all, Americans identified themselves with the victims and considered that the attacks targeted them all.¹⁴⁸ Among New Yorkers, there were significant numbers of people showing signs of PTSD after the attacks.¹⁴⁹

Mike, the New York representative of these informants, is not a man who wishes to elaborate on his feelings about 9/11, at least not in our interview. His replies were usually short and to the point, and even though he lives in New York where the attacks took place, the language he used to describe how 9/11 felt to him was not characterized by sad emotions, although the words he said made it clear that the events of that day had a great impact on him. Like the rest, he remembered exactly where he was:

I was at work and I listened to it on the radio. After the second one, the second plane hit, we stopped working and we went home. You know, to make sure that everyone we knew that worked in the city were all right. We hoped they were. (...)

I wasn't scared...I... nah.. I felt bad for everybody you know, what happened was terrible, but... it seemed they had their targets picked out. (...)

9/11 made me join the Army, sure did. I wouldn't have done it had they not done that or something similar to that.

9/11 made a lasting impression on these veterans, and probably all Americans who were old enough to realize what had happened. In the words of one of my informants, the nation was

¹⁴⁸ "A national survey of stress reactions after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks" *Schuster et al.*, 2001.

¹⁴⁹ "Trends of Probable Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in New York City after the September 11 Terrorist Attacks" Galea:2003.

traumatized. For the US, it was clear that something had to be done to make the country safer from terrorist attacks, and to assure the people that they would not have to endure another day like 9/11. After demanding that Afghanistan give up the location of Osama bin Laden, upon which the Taliban refused, the US chose war. This meant that thousands of US soldiers would be sent to Afghanistan to solve the conflict, and the following presents what my informants knew about the society and the religion in the country before going there.

4.9 Knowledge about Afghanistan and Islam prior to any Army schooling

Three of the veterans proved to have little or no knowledge about Afghanistan and Islam before the schooling they got in the Army. Justin said he knew “not much at all”. He did not even know where the country was located.

Brad first claimed to have known nothing, but after some thought, he could recall that he paid a little bit of attention to the conflict Afghanistan had with the Soviets from 1979-89 while he was a student, “but other than that, nothing”.

Will did not know Afghanistan existed until, ironically enough, two days prior to September 11. He was listening to the radio where they ran a story about Ahmad Shah Massoud¹⁵⁰, who was assassinated September 9. Will remembers listening to the radio, thinking “what’s Afghanistan?”. He was already in the military, and four weeks after September 11 he found himself in Uzbekistan, working with the very organization he had heard about on the radio.

Mike said he had some knowledge about Afghanistan, although what he mentioned was not general history or facts, but more an interest in Al Qaeda. He had followed this terrorist organization since “the bombing of the USS Cole¹⁵¹ and the bombings in Tanzania”¹⁵². He also

¹⁵⁰ The leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan

¹⁵¹ The US Naval vessel USS Cole took a hit in the side by suicide bombers from Yemen on October 12, 2000, while it was refueling at a port in Aden, Yemen. In addition to the two suicide bombers, 17 were killed and 47 injured. (“USS Cole Bombing” *GlobalSecurity.org*)

¹⁵² In 1998, US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania were attacked by suicide bombers. In Kenya, approximately 213 people were killed and 5000 wounded, in Tanzania, 11 were killed and 86 wounded. None of the people hurt or killed in Tanzania were Americans. This happened August 8, 1998, which was the eighth anniversary of the arrival of American troops in Saudi Arabia, ostensibly a deliberate choice by Osama bin Laden, who was thought to be hiding out in Afghanistan at the time.

knew “a bit of what happened when the Russians were there”, so he had heard of the country and knew some of its recent history.

With the exception of Mike and Brad having heard about the war with the Soviets and about Al Qaida, knowledge about Afghanistan was practically non-existent with these men before they got any Army schooling. How about Islam in general then?

Brad’s reply was short and concise: “little to nothing”. Will replied in kind: “absolutely nothing”. And my conversation with Justin gave me an example of religious illiteracy in a country without any schooling on religions in public schools, where Justin got his education. Here follows an excerpt from our interview:

Julie: What did you know about Islam before the Army schooling?

Justin: Umm... nothing.

Julie: Nothing?

Justin: Not much. I just understood that it was a world religion, that it existed throughout the world... and that Cat Stevens, one of my favorite guitar players, converted to Islam.

Julie: How about like... Muhammad. Did you know anything about the Prophet Muhammad at that time?

Justin: The only Muhammad I’d heard of was Muhammad Ali.

Mike replied that he had read quite a bit on Islam on his own. He had followed Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda and had “read extensively on them, on Islam and the more extreme elements of Islam”. Again, Mike’s reply gives a hint that to him, Afghanistan, Islam and Al Qaeda are all sides of the same matter. I asked him if that was what Islam was to him – groups like Al Qaeda. He laughed, raised his voice and replied:

I believe that that’s what *they* [the Muslims] believe it is, you know... I would say most of them believe that’s what it is, I think... you know, that’s the way it seems to me... on 9/11 they were all handing out

President Clinton responded by ordering a bombing on a pharmaceutical plant (that he believed to be producing chemical weapons) and sending missile strikes into Afghanistan, killing an estimate of 24 people in Afghanistan. (“US Embassy Bombings” *About.com*)

candies in all those Muslim countries! Like it was the greatest thing that had ever happened, so... yeah, I'm a firm believer that that's what a majority of them think.

The general answer I got when asking about the veterans' knowledge about Afghanistan and Islam prior to the Army schooling was "little to nothing". Two of them knew some about the Soviet invasion and Mike had read about Islam on his own initiative. In his mind, Islam and terrorism are one and the same, and the Muslims he had read about, were all terrorists.

From what we have seen earlier in this thesis, the reply "little to nothing" when asked what they knew about Islam, is quite common among US citizens. Had they known a great deal about Islam, it would have been something out of the ordinary. People who enlist as soldiers in the US Military reflect the population well, if we are to believe a survey where the demographic status of the all-volunteer and non-draft military was examined: "This paper (...) refutes the claim that enlisted troops are underprivileged and come from underprivileged areas. In terms of education, household income, race, and home origin, the troops are more similar than dissimilar to the general population."¹⁵³

The teachers in the Army had their work cut out for them. How did they teach about Afghanistan and Islam? What did the soldiers learn about the society, religion and culture in the country they were going to live and work?

¹⁵³ "Who Bears the Burden? Demographic Characteristics of U.S. Military Recruits Before and After 9/11"
Kane:2005

4.10 The Army schooling

“It is critical to be fully aware and cognizant of the social reality in which we are practicing conflict resolution”¹⁵⁴

Brad had been in the military longest of these veterans, and he got some training before he left for Afghanistan. This was to be expected, since he was a Commissioned Officer.

Brad and his fellow soldiers had 6 months of training before deployment, and in his mind, the training was very poor. He also thinks this is something that everyone in the military would concur to, “from the top of the chain on down”. But, he argued, the US needed boots on the ground and time was of the essence. A lot of times the training “is the stepchild that doesn’t receive the resources that it really needs”, he stated. At that point in time, in 2006, he perceived his teachers as more experienced with the state of affairs in Iraq than in Afghanistan, so a lot of the training felt somewhat irrelevant to him: “I remember that used to anger us when they would relate their experiences from Iraq to what we were doing, because this was not Iraq, this was Afghanistan”.

There was one thing that Brad experienced as useful with this training, which was the scenario based training where he as an officer would walk into a staged conflict and try to solve it the best he could. However, this cultural training lasted only one afternoon. The soldiers agreed that this was useful, and would have wished to have more of it.

Then, they had a “tiny bit of language training that was worthless”. Brad got lucky in Afghanistan, because his translator spoke both Dari and Pashtu, so he could bring him from the north to the south of the country. Communicating in a country with several languages and dialects was extremely challenging, so Brad appreciated his interpreter.

Brad and his fellow soldiers saw a movie called “Osama” about a family struggling to cope after the man in the house was killed by the Taliban. Brad described the movie as very moving. It was shown to him by a couple of Afghans who got hired to come in and talk about language training. They also had interactions with Afghans on some training exercises.

¹⁵⁴ Chené 2008:32

However, Brad points to the fact that he does not remember learning about the Afghans' religion at all. There was never any formal discussion about religion.

Wanting to be better prepared, Brad took upon himself to learn as much as he could before going. He read books about Afghanistan and especially about the Taliban, "more concerned with the enemy than the culture so to speak", but he also read books like "The Kite Runner"¹⁵⁵, which was popular at that time. He summed up his schooling as poor, and stated that he got most of his schooling from the Afghans themselves, when he was in the field. He also thinks the Army "might have got smarter since back then", and that the schooling has improved in recent years.

Justin did not receive any schooling on the topic of religion and culture before he was already *in* Afghanistan. He and his fellow soldiers had a briefing in Kandahar that lasted about 4 hours. There they were told about a few of the Afghan religious customs and rules, such as not to eat pork or drink alcohol, and were instructed not to offer such food and drink to anyone. This was during Ramadan, and they learned that this was a time of fasting and a highly religious time. He was also told a bit about prayer "and things of that nature".

The briefing felt very useful to Justin. He was taught how not to offend the locals and to respect their space. This was close to ten years ago, so Justin does not remember in detail all the teachers said and how they said it, but he remembers thinking that the teachers seemed concerned about the well-being of the soldiers. When I asked: "how about the well-being of the Afghans?" Justin replied that the teachers mostly expressed their concern about his group "so we would pay attention, you know, we were just a group of privates at the time".

Justin appreciated the briefing. However, he would have liked to learn more, and preferably *before* he went to Afghanistan.

¹⁵⁵ "The Kite Runner" (2003) is a novel by Khaled Hosseini that tells the story of an Afghan boy named Amir who grows up in a very tumultuous time in Afghanistan. The book talks about atrocities committed by, among others, the Taliban. It became a bestseller in several Western countries and the novel was also adapted into a movie.

Will expressed the hardest criticism when it came to the Army training. He claims he did not receive any proper education about Islam, and the training he got, was not aimed at better cultural or religious understanding:

In the military there's a certain amount of training that stereotypes and teaches the sensory organs, mainly the eyes, to react to people who were dressed in traditional garments in the faith of Islam, or people who describe to that culturally. And in my perspective, it intentionally breeds hate towards the way people look, while having a complete lack of cultural knowledge or understanding about *why* they look that way, *why* they pray five times a day, *why* they eat the things that they do, *why* they face the direction they do when they pray, *why* they wear what they wear, you know, *none* of that was described to me. I did three tours in Afghanistan actually, and none of that was really... they never went into great detail. The only "cultural training" was pop-up targets that had people with turbans on, so we would shoot at those. You know, so that's about as deep as it goes. And everything else I learned about Pashtun culture and Uzbeks, Tajiks and Afghans, I learned from them! From talking to them.

Will was in the Army and served his country abroad, and did not feel much appreciated or well taken care of by his commanding officers. He was not prepared for what met him in Afghanistan. While Brad had some language training, Will did not get that at all. He describes his initial deployment in these words: "we had no cultural understanding *at all*, it was just like putting us out in the desert and "hey, we're on the place now". So it's really alarming now that I reflect on that, there was very, very, very little cultural education."

The training that Will got, concentrated on "how to blow things up and teaching people how to build new things". He worked a bit with developing infrastructure and defense for remote bases on the Pakistani border. Everything he learned about culture, he learned from the people there.

Mike enlisted in 2008, and said he got some extensive classes on cultural awareness. It seems things had changed a lot since Will's time in the Army. Mike said they learned basically how not to offend the Afghans: "We were supposed to go over there and play nice, and that's what we tried to do. But... that was pretty much the extent of it, you know, just play nice and try not to insult or offend anybody. Which everyone tried very hard to do while they were over there."

Mike learned about the Afghan culture and religion, and he also got some language classes. He thought it was all very informative, although he had read up on the subject before enlisting. The schooling was described as thorough, helpful and informative. So before Mike went to Afghanistan, he knew about many of the customs, about the conflict between Shias and Sunnis and how to deal with women (or rather, that he should not deal with women at all). He remembers the schooling lasting quite a while, with lots of classes. His officers also tried to help them remember what they had learned in the Army schooling while they were in Afghanistan as well:

(...) this was ongoing throughout all the training. From the minute you got there to the minute you got to Afghanistan, throughout, you know. All the superior officers always tried to keep in our minds what upsets them [the Afghans]... that type of thing. And how to avoid that at all cost, no matter what. We were very sensitive to their feelings.

I asked him if he had heard of the “hearts and minds” strategy that was publicly announced by McChrystal in the later stages of the war. He replied:

(...) that’s the whole doctrine. Hearts and minds, hearts and minds, hearts and minds, not offend them, make nice with them, show them that we’re not invaders, we’re just here to get the bad guys, that’s it. We’re not here to occupy your country, we’re here to get rid of the bad guys, that’s it, we’re here to get rid of the people who did us wrong, we don’t just mess with anybody, we were there for a specific reason.

Mike claimed that the Army could not have prepared him any more for what he was going to see and experience in Afghanistan. He describes his stay over there as being exactly what his schooling had taught him.

4.11 Experiences made in the field

While most of my informants agreed that the pre-deployment schooling that was supposed to prepare them to live and work in the Afghan society was poor or non-existent, they also agreed that there is no way to really prepare a soldier for the challenges of war. Some of it just has to be experienced and endured. Even Mike, who was very satisfied with his pre-deployment preparation, said his experiences were hard to put into words: “You’d have to go there and see for yourself, because... for me it was... from everything I was told, and I had read up extensively on my own, when you go there and you see it with your own eyes, it’s very different. *Very* different... it’s, it’s... very different.” These veterans learned a great deal about Afghanistan and Islam by being there and interacting with the locals.

Justin travelled all over Afghanistan, but he was mostly stationed in the Pashtun area, where most of the Taliban come from. He remembers thinking in his initial encounter with the Afghans that they were warm and welcoming people. He got to sit down with an Afghan man and his family and was served Naan bread and some other local specialties. He often woke up to the Muslim call of prayer. To him, they did not seem that much different from church bells, but they were perceived as more rigorous. He had never seen Americans get out and pray during school or work time, which he could often observe in Afghanistan.

He never partook in any religious rituals or gatherings, partly because he himself was not a Muslim, but also out of fear that his chain of command would dislike it and think it could interfere with his work.

It seemed to Justin that the women did all the work concerning the family setting. The men were “more like diplomats who would go around debating with each other and stuff like that”. It quickly struck him how men and women were not equals and women should stay in the hindsight of men, which he perceived as more culturally prescribed than religious.

It was a bit frustrating for Justin not to be able to ask the Afghans what they thought about anything, at least not without using an interpreter. He was only able to read their facial expressions. A few times he experienced having ethical dilemmas as to whether or not he should intervene in certain situations. If there was trouble, his moral standards sometimes told him to

intervene, but he was not necessarily allowed to because it could be just the way the Afghans did things. He would have liked to change a few things, but he lacked the necessary knowledge to determine “if this was just how they did things”.

Since Justin had difficulties communicating with the locals, he did not always get to know what the Afghans thought about the Americans. But from their non-verbal language, he perceived them as curious:

All of a sudden there's a truck full of American soldiers in a village where there were no post or such. Everyone would come out to see what was going on. I actually think that they were amused by us. One of our trucks going down the road would always be followed by 10-12 kids asking for dollars and pens, papers, you know school supplies and things like that, that must have been their perception, that we were there to give them school supplies. But there were quite a few older folks that would stand around and gawk at our downfalls, our fears.

Will claims he got most of his cultural education from Afghan teenagers. The interpreters for his team would usually be young boys, adolescents, who would give them a little education on what was acceptable behavior, where they should go and not go, what they should eat and not eat, and teach them a few words here and there.

His first meeting with any indigenous people was in Uzbekistan, where he first got stationed. Will was 19 at the time, and a lot of things just did not make any sense to him. When he went to Afghanistan in 2002, he had matured a bit and started to understand more. He smiled when asked about the Afghan people and said he loved the Afghans he was working with. While the soldiers around the American military base could seem disoriented and angry to him, the Afghans they cooperated with would be smiling and “goofin’ off”. During this stay in Afghanistan, he grew more and more accustomed to the Afghan way of life, their culture and religious rituals.

The third time he went over, something changed in him. His identity as a soldier was on shaky grounds and he started questioning his mission, what really happened on 9/11 and what America's role was in this war. He eventually started seeing *himself* as a terrorist for the

occupying US force. It seemed from my interview that what actually changed him was the force of friendship:

The third time I went over I actually became pretty good friends with someone who had built a banjo from scratch. He called it an Afghani banjo, and he really inspired me. And I had an affinity with this guy because... I'm a hillbilly from Arkansas, right, I grew up listening to people playing the banjo and stuff, and I remember thinking: "holy shit! This guy's a hillbilly too!" And he plays the banjo, like, there's not too much difference. He comes from a farming family, I come from a farming family, you know, who's the real terrorist in this situation?

I actually went home and bought a banjo. I still have it, and I play it to this day. I actually have it upstairs, I might play it for you later.

To Will, the roles got reversed, even though he had experienced the 9/11 attacks and how they, in his words, "traumatized the entire nation". He started questioning the media's depiction of the 9/11 events and heard some of the conspiracy theories surrounding the attacks. Working with explosives, he knew it could be difficult to get things to blow up and fall apart exactly the way he intended, and it seemed to him that getting *two* skyscrapers to collapse just by flying airplanes into them was unlikely. Also, he claimed to have been showed orders to invade Iraq when he was in Afghanistan in 2002, but when he went home on leave to the US, the government had not yet announced the invasion. "The Bush administration was tossing out all these cookies like "the axis of evil" and "weapons of mass destruction", talking everyone into going to war! And the media played right along with it." Will and other soldiers with him could not understand why the US would invade Iraq when they were not close to being finished in Afghanistan. They started questioning what they were doing in the military, and what the military was really doing.

In the following quote he describes just how much these experiences impacted him:

I was completely taken advantage of. I see my service with the Military as a relationship, you know, with someone that I love. I had joined, intending to give my life for my beliefs and for this country. Much like, if I were to marry someone, I become a part of them, I'm no longer me, I'm half of this person. That's the kind of commitment I had with the Military. I was no longer myself, I was absorbed into this nebulous idea. I was basically lied to and cheated on. When the invasion of Iraq happened, I felt completely taken advantage of, my spirit as a human, my identity, my life... and there were many other people who felt the

same way! We went along with the Afghan thing, but then this complete lie to build a war in Iraq, it shattered... I wouldn't say it shattered a lot of hopes and dreams, it shattered a lot of realities.

From what Will learned about the Afghan religion in the field, he would say there are huge differences in the belief systems in Afghanistan and the US. He thinks there are so many unlike types of Christianity, while Muslims seem to agree more on their theology and beliefs. Most of the Christians Will have met in the US have been “by and large completely ignorant to what they actually believe in”, while the Muslims he met in Afghanistan were dedicated to their religion and able to cite lengthy parts of the Quran. According to Will, the Muslims of Afghanistan know a great deal about what they believe in. They know why they live the way they do and why they subscribe to their rigorous systems. He perceives “the Christian narrative”, as he calls it, to be a story about a peacemaker. Even though he questions what we can really know about Jesus who lived 2000 years ago, since according to him, most people do not even know what is happening in Afghanistan today, he says the story of Jesus is the story of a man who dedicated his whole life to walk around, talk to people about his faith, and promote peace. “He shunned the entire institution of power and wealth, which is the complete opposite of the average Christian in the country right now”. So in his mind, most American Christians do not know what Jesus was trying to do, and they do not subscribe to his teachings.

Will harbored a great love to his country, and says he still loves his country and the American people dearly. However, it seems there were five crucial factors that changed his perception of the US Military, the Afghan people and the war in Afghanistan:

- 1) His growing understanding of, and friendship with, Afghans
- 2) The media's presentation of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq
- 3) The Bush administration's rhetoric
- 4) The Afghan Muslims' devotion to their faith
- 5) The Christian (misinterpreted or ignored) narrative about Jesus as a maker of peace

When it comes to gender roles, Will knew about the common Western perception that the Hijab is degrading and that all women are oppressed in Muslim societies. In Afghanistan, he learned that the veil could be considered to be empowering, since the women “get to hide themselves and they only display who they are to the ones they choose to remove the veil to”.

Most of the American soldiers he interacted with perceived Muslim men as misogynists, and Will gave an example that clearly demonstrated this:

The Taliban would make the women walk 10 feet behind the men in Afghanistan, but whenever an armed, female American soldier would escort a man from one place to the other, she would make them walk 10 feet behind her. So it was hugely disrespectful towards them, but if they wanted to be paid in the American dollar they had to do as she said. And she had a loaded firearm, so that had a little bit to do with it.

Justin said the Afghans were curious about the Americans and their presence in the country. Will had the same perception:

I think, for the average Afghan we would have to be a complete mystery. I recently read, the statistics were drawn from either Kandahar or Khost province, but it stated that over 90% of the men in that province had no knowledge of 9/11 ever happening, and did not know why the United States was in Afghanistan. Both of these provinces are on the border of Pakistan, those are the hot beds of conflict where a lot of the action has been happening for the past 10 years. Over 90% of the people in the province didn't even know why we were there, so when they see us flying over their land in heavily armed gunships, and you know, we carry a great deal of firearms and ammunition and so on and so forth, they've got to think pretty crappy things about us. Given that most of them had no idea why we were even there, and we weren't exactly carrying around fruit baskets.

Unlike Justin, Will was not at all satisfied with the help he got from his commanding officers. He felt like he could ask "how"-questions, but not "why"-questions. For him, the Army provided very little purpose, direction and motivation. Information in the Military seemed very compartmentalized to him, something he thought was done on purpose so that no one would be able to see the whole picture, only their little part in what was going on.

Brad remembers his first meeting with Afghans as an enlightening experience. He got to sit down on the floor in the barracks with some Afghan men he was going to work with, and they all had Chai tea and shared a cordial conversation. They discussed the mission ahead through his interpreter.

Ramadan turned out to be a very difficult month from a military perspective. They were on the battlefield and the Afghan soldiers were deprived of food and energy. However, Brad was amazed by their steadfastness and faithfulness towards their religion. “It’s not like here in the US, they would pray five times a day. We would drive down the road and see trucks pulled off the road and prayer blankets, and the drivers were praying. You don’t see that in our culture”.

Brad perceived the Afghans as good people who just happened to believe in a different god. He had some conversations with Afghans about religion although he was not supposed to: “I guess if we had training, that was the training we had – never talk politics and never talk about religion with these folks”. In these “forbidden” conversations, he learned about Islam, but also about his own faith:

My interpreter talked about their religion and I learned a little bit about it and I probably learned more about Christianity from him because someone like him, he knew more about my gospel than I did, and I ran across little boys that were 7-8 years old that could recite by verse, word for word, verses out of the Quran, and it amazed me how bright those young men, those young boys, were, but it also saddened me that that was the *only* thing they knew. It’s the only thing that they were being taught, and... other than probably, you know, in certain extremist areas in the country, they were taught negative things. You know a lot of the enemy that we encountered truly believed in Paradise, and one quick way to get there was trying to kill an infidel. And we were the infidels. We would monitor radio traffic from the enemy, and they knew that, so they would try to come up with their own code, and they would try to persuade our interpreters who listened, that they were doing a terrible thing for Islam by helping the infidels. And my interpreter was kidnapped at one point in time. And it was a very humbling experience.

Through his interaction with the locals, Brad learned that not all terrorists were necessarily regarded to be Muslims. The people he worked with said the extremists were giving Islam a bad name. They claimed that the Taliban was taking things out of context and being ignorant, and wanted to keep the people ignorant.

At any given time, there were 4-24 Americans in his group and anywhere from 20-400 Afghans who tried to reach out to the village elders and provide security for them to have Jirgas¹⁵⁶. They secured villages and gave them back to the Afghans. If riot arose after they had

¹⁵⁶ A *Jirga* is a tribal assembly of elders which takes decisions by consensus, particularly among the Pashtun people but also in other ethnic groups near them; they are most common in Afghanistan and among the Pashtuns in Pakistan near its border with Afghanistan. All the men present can speak out, and there is no leader. A Jirga has no executive power, so if what the Jirga decides is going to be set in motion, men from that Jirga have to choose for themselves to act according to it. A Jirga can be compared to a town meeting in the United States or a regional assembly in England, where important regional matters are addressed among the people of the area. (Barth 2010:28)

given the village back, and soldiers started getting shot and killed in the streets, they went in and took control again.

After our interview, Brad showed me many photos from Afghanistan. In every other photo or so, he would point to a man, telling me a story or some facts about him. In between, he would laugh, remembering good times they shared together. Then, with many of the photos, he would also tell me when and how that person got killed during the war. Clearly, he had some very painful memories from his time in Afghanistan. However, he had many nice things to say about the Afghans and their religion: “I wish that Christians in America could be as disciplined in their faith as the Muslims I witnessed. There are some things that Christians could learn from Muslims, and there are some things that Muslims, I think, can learn from Christians”.

Brad encountered many challenges when working with Afghans. Earning their trust was hard. Many Afghans wanted to help, but they were afraid that they would help the Americans and then be abandoned, so that the extremists could step in and kill them for cooperating with the infidels. The Taliban used anyone as spies, even young children, and corruption was high. It was demanding for the Americans as well, to dare to trust a seemingly well-intentioned Afghan, because he could prove to be Taliban and betray them all. Brad once witnessed an Afghan school teacher who got so tired of the Taliban destroying his village that he took matter into his own hands and killed one of the Taliban leaders. Brad thinks we will see a lot of change in Afghanistan when more Afghans are willing to take such action, but it requires “a tremendous sacrifice”.

Being an officer, Brad would not allow his men to go into the mosques, and they always respected the mosques. However, the Taliban did not seem to have the same respect for them, since they would “countless times” use graveyards and such to fire upon Brad and his soldiers. They never attacked back in those places unless they saw it as a life and death situation, and if they did, they would use Afghan soldiers to do that.

Mike first said that he generally got along well with the Afghans. When I asked him more questions, and he started elaborating on how he experienced his stay in Afghanistan, it was clear that he had seen and experienced many things that were shocking to him. The gender roles in the

country were especially foreign to him. Contrary to what Will thought, these roles seemed to Mike to be prescribed by religion rather than culture:

I would say it was pretty much religion, because it didn't matter where you went, they treated them the same. And don't forget, that I had to make several stops to get to Afghanistan, I stopped in other countries, and they treated women the same in every country I went to. So I would say... I've read parts of the Quran, and they didn't treat women... they don't hold a lot of esteem for women. And it shows when you're over there. They were definitely second, if not third class citizens. And it was appalling the way women were treated over there. It was sad.

There were... I saw young girls over there with acetone on their face for going to school... I mean... that's pretty bizarre. I can't see any reason how to justify that. So this is what we were dealing with over there.

Mike also emphasized that there were cultural dissimilarities in different parts of Afghanistan. The distances were great, and it took a long time to drive from one village to another. Some places he did not have significant problems communicating via interpreters and getting along with the locals, other places it was difficult. He seemed to take it hard that, as he said, the Afghans would be so nice to him and the other American soldiers as long as the soldiers had something to give to them, but if the Afghans did not receive something, they treated the soldiers badly. "They were happy to take stuff from you, but when you ran out they would throw rocks at you."

According to Mike, the Afghan soldiers he was working with were useless. "They were all corrupt and didn't care". If Mike was shocked over anything in Afghanistan, it was how nice he and the others American had to be to the Afghans, and how much corruption they had to tolerate. If he were in charge, he would have employed another strategy than the "hearts and minds"-doctrine. What Mike would have wished for, was "more stick and less carrot". I imagine the 9/11 attacks in his own city making a great impression on Mike, and also what he saw on TV from Muslim countries after the attacks. When asked if he thought all the Afghans supported the 9/11 attacks, he replied:

I don't know how much they *supported it*, but I think they were happy that it happened. I would say that a majority was happier than sad. You know, you saw that on their networks, people handing out little candies to each other, enjoying it, "down with the Great Satan"... but we still went there and played nice with them and... pretended like we were friends... or whatever.

His perception of Islam has not changed for the better from his experiences in Afghanistan. He cannot bring himself to see Islam as a religion of peace, and finds it interesting that from what he has come to know, they kill more of each other than they do non-Muslims. He finds it paradoxical that the US should try to “be nice” when “the Shia and Sunnis blow each other up every day”. Islam speaks for itself, according to Mike. It is obvious to him that the religion does not promote peace at all, and that the world community has different standards for Muslim countries and countries like the US: “The Muslims blow up each others’ mosques left and right! If we had done that, forget it, the outcry from the UN would have been... forget it! They would still be crying!”

4.12 The veterans’ evaluation of their pre-deployment schooling

So far in this chapter, we can make the following observations from these veterans’ stories:

- 1) They were all American citizens with some type of Christian upbringing, or at least raised in a community built on Christian values.
- 2) The veterans did not have a very extensive knowledge about Afghanistan before deployment. The little knowledge some had was limited to hearing about the conflict with the Soviets and reading about Al Qaeda, and did not include a lot of cultural understanding.
- 3) None of them had a very extensive knowledge about Islam before joining the Army.
- 4) 9/11 affected them all. Feelings of shock and fear were described, but 9/11 also worked as a motivation to fight and retaliate.
- 5) They had no competence in the Afghan language at all, so all verbal communication had to be done via interpreters. Even though two of them had language classes, they were not able to communicate in any Afghan language.
- 6) The Army provided little or no training when it comes to cultural sensitivity and interreligious communication for the veterans who served in the early stage of the war. It seemed to have improved a lot by the time Mike enlisted.

- 7) The veterans left Afghanistan with many horrible experiences, but also with a lot more understanding of the conflict, of the Afghan culture and religion, both their own and the Afghans'. Some got a more positive impression of Islam while serving, others had their negative impression reinforced while staying in Afghanistan.

What do these veterans wish they had known or been taught before deployment? Was the preparation adequate according to them? What do they think could have been useful competences to have in such conflict solving, seen in hindsight?

Justin points out that he would leave it up to the leadership, in which he trusts. He was the only one who affirmed that he got a lot of help and support from his commanding officers in the field. He still recognizes that it would have been advantageous to meet someone from Afghanistan before going. Justin sees himself as relatively open-minded, but according to him, there were many people in the military who were more pessimistic and judgmental when it came to people from another culture. "They signed up for the military and not a specific country, you know...". However, spoken with the true American independent spirit, he states that gaining more knowledge about the culture and religion is not just the responsibility of the US Military. Every soldier had a responsibility towards himself to learn, and he could have learned more through research of his own before leaving. But the real motivation to learn more did not come until he met with the Afghans personally and got inspired by them to learn more about their culture and religion.

If the Army could have done anything differently, he suggests coming up with a little more reading material and speaking to the troops about this topic *before* deployment. He also said "it would be beneficial to have someone from Afghanistan to give the briefings as opposed to someone from Texas".

Brad emphasized that he suspects the training on the topic of culture and religion has improved from when he was in the Army. But in his time, they should have learned more about

“how to shoot, move and communicate, which is what a soldier does.” He wished they had known more about the culture, but realizes that training is not cheap.

We could have prepared and prepared and prepared and still have come to the country not prepared. There's a give and take here that you have to understand. There are decisions taken here much beyond me and you, there's a give and take and there's difficult positions they've got to take and you could spend years preparing for situations like that, but until you're there... when you get to the situation, you gotta figure it out.

Will is once again the hardest and most outspoken critic of the Army, and had many thoughts and concrete suggestions when asked what could have been done differently. Apart from abolishing the US Military altogether, if he was in charge, he would put every single soldier going to Afghanistan through a 2-year social work program and request that they work with helping the communities, developing infrastructure and empowering communities to solve their own problems “instead of giving them democracy at gunpoint”. According to Will, and many with him, Afghanistan needs social workers, not soldiers. “Violence beget violence”.

Then he described in length how he believed the US Military has the power to change the belief system in all of the US. Raised into the American culture as a Christian, he thinks there is a good chance you would know little about Islam, and because of terrorist activities like 9/11, you would most likely fear Muslims. He imagines great ripple effects if the US Military decided to focus on teaching their soldiers about Islam:

It could cause a lot of effects, it could cause things to happen that the US Military doesn't want to happen, which is for people to really wake up and say “this is messed up”. So we probably won't see that happen. But the US Military is the largest employer in the US. So if the US Military actually made a decision like that, it would cause ripple effects among our citizenry. It wouldn't happen immediately. People would have to serve 4 to 6 years, get back, get recycled into society with their experience, so 10-15 years down the road, it could change. The same thing happened with African Americans, after WWII. What happened was people were completely segregated. Black people and white people lived in different barracks. That changed during the war. They started living together, they started fighting together, and they came out of the Military and back into the citizenry with their entire idea of segregation was completely resolved. A lot of people still held on to the hate, but what gave birth to the social rights movement, some people argue, is WWII, because the policy on how people lived with each other actually shifted during WWII. And it caused the biggest employer in the US, the military, to make a shift in how we view those things. Now something very important has happened, that “don't ask, don't tell”-policy. That has the potential to cause huge amounts of shift towards homosexuals within our own society. Because when the Military decides to

do it, it's gonna touch almost every person in this country. And again it's gonna take 6-10-15 years down the road for all of these people to recycle back into civilian life, but yeah... there is a possibility that the Military itself has the ability to change our citizenry and our belief systems based on the policy that they issue.

All in all, Will was very dissatisfied with his training, and claimed that neither he nor any of his fellow soldiers knew anything about Afghan religion and culture before going. He described the teaching as something that aimed to turn him into a “trigger-happy sociopath with a complete disregard for human life and human value”. He would have liked it to be very different.

Then we have Mike, who believed the Army could not have prepared him more. If something should be done differently, it should be “more sticks and less carrots”, he would wish for a much harder approach. To him, Islam is a horrible religion, and what he saw of the Afghan culture, he did not like. That especially concerned the way the Afghan men treated their women, and how the Afghans would be nice only in situations where they could benefit from it. He said his company was there to catch “the bad guys”, but help the Afghan people by building houses and schools, and he got very angry and sad when they were attacked doing just that.

4.13 Summary

Interviewing these veterans has been very interesting and enlightening. Some of their responses were as expected, while some of the information I got from them was surprising to me.

It is clear that the memories from 9/11 are still very much present in these veterans' minds. I would believe the majority of Americans, and people from other countries who followed the attacks in the media, still remembers the footage from the Twin Towers collapsing vividly. 9/11 has in this thesis proved to be a major motivator for Americans to enlist in the Army to seek justice and retaliation, and to serve and protect their homeland. Americans were traumatized or

showed stress symptoms in the wake of the attacks, especially citizens living in or around New York.

Religious literacy proved to be relatively poor among the informants. With no education on religions in school, the only way of learning about them is for US citizens to actively seek knowledge on their own. They will learn some from the media, but with the media's search for the sensational, you are usually only presented to the extremes, and not the mainstream way of practicing a religion. Also, there are always more sides to a story, and the media does not always show the nuances. Some of these veterans did not even know what Islam was before they got deployed to a Muslim country. Knowledge about Afghanistan and its cultures was not very extended before joining the Army either.

The responses I got about the pre-deployment schooling could not have been more varied. Some claimed they did not learn about religion and culture at all. Justin got only a 4-hour briefing, and that was *after* he got to Afghanistan. Will was very outspoken about how he felt taken advantage of and used in a game where he was not informed of the real purpose. He thinks the Army did not teach him about Afghan religion and culture on purpose, but rather tried to keep him ignorant. Then we have Mike, on the other side of the scale, who said he learned a lot from his pre-deployment schooling and who wished the Army did not make them be so sensitive towards the Afghans' religion and culture.

Will served in the earliest stage of this war in 2002, and then again in 2003-2004. He claimed to have received no schooling on religion whatsoever. Justin also served in 2003-2004, and reported only getting a 4-hour briefing in Kandahar. Brad served in 2006 and could tell me about some cultural training and a few, useless language classes, but no explicit schooling on Afghan religion. Mike served in 2008-2009, and reported getting extensive schooling on both culture and religion. His training focused above all on learning how to be sensitive and not offend or insult anyone.

So with the information given by these veterans, we can see that there is a clear shift from the early stages of the war and to the later stages. There is evidently more focus on learning about Islam and how Islam is expressed in an Afghan setting now. This makes sense, since the war proved to last longer than first anticipated and a new strategy was needed. General McChrystal said it was imperative to win Afghan hearts and minds, and Mike reported to have heard that doctrine over and over again, throughout his training and his stay in Afghanistan. It seems that the US Military might have realized that the Taliban cannot be defeated without the support of the Afghan people, and that in order to gain that support, the US soldiers need more schooling so they can better understand and communicate with people from a radically different nation with a very dissimilar culture, where religion plays such a big part.

I found it interesting how Will, who did not get any schooling on this topic, managed to find friends among the Afghans, while Mike, who reported getting extensive schooling on the topic, found nothing good about Islam and found many of the Afghans to be hypocrites. Brad, who is the only one among these veterans who identifies himself as a committed Christian, said he believed Christians could actually learn a lot from Muslims, from their faithfulness and devotion. Like Will, he did not receive any explicit schooling on religion.

It could be that for Mike, all the schooling and talk about hearts, minds, not insulting and being sensitive did in his mind not mesh well with what he had enlisted to do. He lived in New York and saw the Twin Towers collapse, and that was the reason why he enlisted. He went to Afghanistan and, in his words, had to “play nice” with the very people he believed to have joined in the terrorists’ celebration over 9/11. He wished the US soldiers could be harder, especially when he saw all the corruption, and all the talk about respect and sensitivity in the Army felt weird since he himself was violated on 9/11 and did not feel at all respected by the Afghans.

I am left to wonder, however, since he said his training officers schooled him on Islam in Afghanistan, and it turned out to be “exactly as they had described”, if they gave a very nuanced description of Afghan religion. Did they teach about the religion Islam where not *all* Muslims are terrorists or sympathize with terrorists, or rather the extreme version of Islam that inevitably leads to armed conflicts? Or did the combination of Mike’s reading about Al Qaeda and all their attacks on Americans, and not having had classes like comparative religion, contribute to him believing that Islam is essentially a bad religion? I do not know.

From hearing Mike and Will’s accounts of the war, it is hard to believe they were in the same war. It is also hard to say why they returned from Afghanistan with so different feelings towards the Afghan people and Islam. However, as mentioned in chapter 3, there is no such thing as an objective reality. Presented in this thesis are the veterans’ partial perspectives, their subjective realities. Mike and Will are *persons* with their own unique way of interpreting reality, and we cannot by hearing their stories tell exactly what influences a US soldier to form an opinion about Afghans. Still, I want to point out certain factors that I believe may have contributed:

1. Will had not learned anything about the Afghans or their religion before going there. He may have thought beforehand that these people were terrorists. When actually meeting them, he saw that there were more nuances to the picture, that it was not all black or white, right or wrong. Mike, on the other hand, learned about the Afghans in his pre-deployment schooling. His motivation to enlist was 9/11, he wanted to try to right a wrong that he believed the people in Afghanistan supported, and for his officers to constantly tell him to be sensitive towards the Afghans’ feelings may have felt off-target to him.
2. 9/11 deserves another mention here. Mike is from New York, the very site of the attack on the Twin Towers. As previously mentioned, surveys have shown that the people who lived close to the attacks showed more stress-symptoms than people living far away. While other Americans could relate to what the New Yorkers experienced that day, the New Yorkers did not have to relate, they were *there*, in the midst of it all. It may be that

the experience of 9/11 impacted Mike more than Will because of Mike's proximity to the location of the terrorist acts.

3. Will had a religious upbringing, while Mike did not. Maybe that enabled Will to relate more to Muslims.
4. Will got to spend more time with Afghans, and his feelings towards them changed *over time*. We do not know how Mike would have felt had he spent more time in Afghanistan.
5. The two seem to have been exposed to different media coverage. Will mentioned having read about conspiracy theories that blame the US for 9/11. Mike mentioned seeing Muslim networks show footage where Muslims were celebrating 9/11, and this clearly made an impression on him. Media can have an enormous impact on how we perceive the world.

More Army schooling does not necessarily lead to soldiers understanding or liking Afghans or Islam any better. There are many factors to consider when analyzing these veterans' interviews, like whether or not they consider themselves religious, what kind of upbringing they had, where they live in the US, what kind of media coverage they were exposed to, how they experienced 9/11, when and how long they were in Afghanistan and so on.

Sharing time and experiences with people trumps theoretical knowledge about them when it comes to creating understanding between nationalities and cultures. We see this in Will's case; he did not have any knowledge about Afghanistan or Islam before the schooling, but he got close with some of the Afghans after being deployed three times.

5 Concluding Reflections

5.1 Introduction

As described in chapter 1 of this thesis, I decided on this topic because of an encounter with a Vietnam veteran. He knew nothing about Vietnam or the people there before his deployment, and I got curious as to how the situation is for US soldiers going to war today.

My investigation of the war in Afghanistan and the US presence there indicates that the US Military has made a lot of changes since the outset of the war. At first, the war was called Operation Infinite Justice, then it was changed in order to avoid offending Muslims. And the interviews with the veterans in this thesis indicate that cultural awareness and religious literacy have been put on the agenda in the soldiers' schooling today, under the heading of the "hearts and minds" doctrine.

The intention of this thesis has been to explore how religious literacy is emphasized in the US soldiers' schooling, because this says a lot about how important it is for the US to understand and cooperate with Afghans in the war against the Taliban. The solution to the Afghans' suffering under the Taliban regime and the continuing enlisting of new Taliban soldiers, cannot be made by the US alone. It has to be made with a deep understanding of, and cooperation with, the Afghan people: The pedagogy of the oppressed is "a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed"¹⁵⁷. In my opinion, it will not be feasible to influence and help such a diverse group of peoples as the Afghans without having a thorough idea of who they really are, what they believe in and what motivates them. "From my point of view, (...) much of organized mediation remains predominantly white monocultural in its worldview and general participation while existing in the midst of a multicultural reality."¹⁵⁸

In this last chapter I will take a look at the information gathered in this thesis. I will say a few words about the process, and give my answers to the research questions outlined in the first chapter:

¹⁵⁷ Freire 2006:48

¹⁵⁸ Chené 2008:34

1. According to US Army veterans who have served in Afghanistan, how is religion emphasized in the US Army pre-deployment schooling?
2. According to US Army veterans, how did the Army schooling prepare them for the challenges they met when interacting with the Afghan people? What do they now think about the Afghans and their religion?

5.2 US Army pre-deployment schooling

Having read a bit about religious literacy in the US before interviewing the veterans, I did not expect them to have extensive knowledge about Islam. I expected them to know even less about Afghanistan. Islam is, after all, present in the US as well, while Afghanistan until quite recently was considered a country so far away with no particular significance for the US.

As it turned out, the veterans knew very little of Islam before joining the Army, but some of them had heard of the Soviets invading Afghanistan, so they knew a little piece of Afghan history. I have argued that in order to understand a country like Afghanistan and its citizens, you have to understand their relationship to Islam since it is present everywhere and is an important part of most Afghans' daily routine.

There are several factors that give Afghans reason to mistrust the US; the number one reason being that the Americans invaded their country and that their fighting the Taliban has several times taken "collateral damage", but also their lack of knowledge about 9/11 ever taking place, and the influence from the Taliban's strategic use of Islam, anti-modernism and anti-Americanism in their rhetoric. Many Afghans interpret the US presence in their country as an attack on Islam, which is a major road-block for the cooperation between the two nations.

When people have a belief that they are willing to fight and die for, it is of utmost importance to really investigate and get a thorough understanding of our own and others' faith, so that we can examine the reasons why we fight and gain a better competence on working for peaceful resolutions. The Taliban fighters are probably convinced that they fight for Islam. Not all US soldiers are Christians, but all the veterans interviewed here were willing to fight to

protect their homeland, their democracy, their *civil religion*, if you will. This war on terrorism is not a war where territories or land is the issue;

The war on terrorism is to a great extent – a far greater extent than most American politicians recognize – a war of ideas. To wage that war, one needs to be equipped with ideas – to understand, among other things, the religious underpinnings of Osama bin Laden’s strategy to engage “the crusader-Zionist alliance” in a clash of civilizations.¹⁵⁹

As hypothesized, 9/11 proved to play a big part in all of these veterans’ motivation to serve. Terrorist attacks of such a grand scale as the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon can be traumatizing for the people affected, and I have argued that not only the people who died in the attacks that day were victims of them. Virtually all Americans could relate to the victims, and the attacks were perceived to be directed at *all* Americans; their culture, their religion, their way of life.

Even though it is safe to assume that all Americans have heard about these attacks, this thesis shows that the same assumption cannot be made about the citizens of Afghanistan. As one of my informants pointed out, many of the Afghans did not know what happened on 9/11 2001, and this lack of knowledge made the gap between Americans and Afghans all the more wide, and the need for schooling greater.

As mentioned in chapter 2, the concept of a “nation” is perceived differently in the US and Afghanistan. While American soldiers were fighting a war for their nation, where the good values of freedom and democracy had to conquer the evils of terrorism, extremists in Afghanistan were fighting for their Muslim community. They would like to see Afghanistan as a theocracy based on their interpretation of the Sharia, but the *nation* is reduced to being a part of the Muslim community. The US soldiers might have known that they would be fighting not only Afghans, but also people from sympathizing nations like Pakistan, but the lack of schooling on militant Islam, at least for the first three veterans interviewed here, deprived them of understanding *why*.

¹⁵⁹ Prothero 2007:26

Years into the war, focus shifted and the US Military's strategy changed. Their aim was now to win hearts and minds. Interviewing US veterans who served at different stages in the war, I found that schooling on religion and how to be sensitive towards cultural differences was more emphasized after this change in strategy.

So the answer to how religion is emphasized in the pre-deployment schooling differs according to when the soldiers interviewed received their schooling. Religious literacy is typically relatively low among Americans, and it seems the Military leaders gradually saw their soldiers' lack of knowledge about the Afghans' religion and culture as a problem. The hearts and minds-doctrine seems to be part of the US Military's strategy to facilitate this cooperation.

5.3 Interaction between US soldiers and Afghans

Although all the veterans interviewed seemed to think it was important to learn about the Afghans, their encounters with the Afghans were experienced in very different ways. There are many factors that influence the soldiers' perception of Afghans, like their background and how much time they spent in Afghanistan, not just the schooling.

From the veterans' observations we can confirm that religion is generally practiced very differently in the US and Afghanistan. The discipline in the Afghans' way of practicing religious rituals fascinated some of the veterans, because they did not see the same wholehearted commitment to religion in the US, where people could go to church on Sundays and forget about God the rest of the week. But religion in Afghanistan was not only perceived in a positive light, one also saw this "display" of religious commitment as hypocrisy where the Muslims tried to gain legitimacy for terrorist activity.

The distinguishing between culture and religion is as blurred among my informants as among textbooks on the topic. The veterans clearly perceived women's role in the Afghan society as diverging from American women's role. Some thought Afghan women's clothing and separateness from Afghan men were prescribed by Islam, others thought it was prescribed by culture. Hijabs and Chadrīs were seen as something that discriminated against women, but were

also seen as having the potential to be empowering for the women wearing them. As elsewhere where the topic of religion vs. culture is discussed, the debate could also in this case probably go on indefinitely.

The cooperation between American and Afghan soldiers did not always go very smooth. There are several reasons as to why this could be difficult. First you have the language barrier, then you have the fact that Muslim Afghan soldiers would connect the politics of the conflict with their religion. In war, soldiers have to trust other soldiers with their lives, and for Afghan soldiers working with non-Muslims, this could be hard. Islam is all-encompassing in their society, and they are supposed to put their lives and their future in the hands of someone who do not necessarily share their religious conviction. They could also think that the American soldiers are there to fight their religion or conquer their land. For Americans who have seen their own people killed in the name of Allah, it can be difficult to fight alongside someone who brings their religion into everything they do.

The American society, and the practice of religion in the US, is very individualized. In Afghanistan, extended families often share a household, and everyone is organized into tribes and villages that stick together. Religious leaders enjoy great respect and worship is done collectively, while in the US, the individual reserves the right to be critical towards religious authorities, and citizens are, in theory at least, free to choose their denomination and worship when and how they wish. The American idea of freedom facilitates this, while the Muslim idea of submission creates a different environment in Afghanistan.

5.4 Summary

The US Army pre-deployment schooling is changing. My brief encounters with US veterans from wars in the past led me to believe that they received virtually no schooling on the country and the people they were going to live among. The interviews with Afghanistan veterans Justin and Will indicated that not much had changed. With Brad, there seemed to be a slight improvement, and according to Mike, the schooling has taken on a brand new approach now. It seems obvious that the US Military now believe that in a counter-insurgency operation like in

Afghanistan, a successful outcome depends on being able to cooperate with locals. And in order to do that, you need to have knowledge about, and an understanding of, the people living there.

Mike mentioned “hearts and minds” several times during our interview, and it is clear that by the time he enlisted, a shift in the US strategy had occurred. However, we have also seen that more schooling on the topic of the Afghan people and their religion does not necessarily lead to soldiers *liking* the people or their religion. From my interview with Will, it seems that spending *time* with other people is more efficient in this aspect than to *learn about* them. That said, whether having American soldiers developing an affinity with Afghans serves the purpose militarily speaking, is another research question altogether. “In the mind of a military commander there can be little room for compassion towards the enemy, since compassion would yield the military advantage, put his own troops at risk, and at best prolong the war, at worst lose it.”¹⁶⁰ Although it is the Taliban and not the civil Afghan that is the enemy, from an American perspective, the way from liking Afghans to feeling compassion with the Taliban soldiers for being raised into extremism in a poor and disadvantaged Afghanistan could be short.

Islam is present virtually everywhere in Afghanistan while the US is a predominantly Christian country, in which people relate to their religion in a very different manner. Civil religion might be a better term to describe Americans’ religiosity, where values like freedom and democracy are treasured in ways reminiscent to religious worshipping. The ability to navigate in this uneven terrain with the purpose of gaining trust and being able to cooperate is important in conflict-resolution, and the increasing emphasis on religion in the soldiers’ schooling indicates a shift in the US Military’s strategy.

The information I got from my informants tells me that civil religion, as I have described that concept in my thesis, is important to Americans regardless of their religion or denomination. Religion has by many sociologists been described as the “glue” of society, but yet we see Americans sticking together, fighting for what they believe in, even though they do not necessarily share religion. It seems that the American civil religion has become that “glue” that binds people of the US together. God is still a prominent figure in the US, both in family life and

¹⁶⁰ Coates 1997:221

at a political level, but who that god is, or which denomination he supports, is not relevant. God is sovereign, and in their civil religion, that seems to be enough information about him.

The information I got in the interviews about the Afghans and their religion pretty much confirms what I had read in advance. Even though Afghanistan does not have the same centralized government that influences the population as the US, and even though the country has different tribes, ethnicities and languages, Islam works as the common denominator, or “glue” if you want, for them all. Especially Brad was observant to their ways of practicing religion, maybe because Brad considered himself to be religious, and he confirmed that Afghans knew a lot about Islam and the Quran, and said they were so much more disciplined in exercising religious rituals and learning about their religion than Americans. In the US, public schools do not teach about religion. In Afghanistan, religion seems to be the top priority, sometimes the only priority, in schools. However, here they do not teach *about* religion, they *teach religion*. It is not a comparative religious study; many of the schools are religious madrasas where the Quran, the Sunna and the Sharia sums up the curriculum. So to put it simple: literacy is higher in the US, while religious literacy, when it comes to Islam at least, seems higher in Afghanistan.

Religion proves to be in the very center of this conflict. The 9/11 attacks were religiously motivated and practically all Afghans are Muslims. The US is a predominantly Christian country that chose to retaliate after 9/11. This was to protect American citizens from attacks in the future, but also to fight for what they *believe in* – freedom, democracy and the honor of their homeland. It is my conclusion that if any cooperation between the US and Afghanistan is going to see success, both parties have to seek to gain more knowledge about, and understanding of, the other. I am finding it strange that giving their soldiers extensive pre-deployment schooling on Islam has not been a top priority for the US Military. But, as this thesis indicates, things have started to change.

5.5 Suggestions for further research

So much remains to be said and I have a few suggestions for people who would like to investigate this topic, or related topics, further. One interesting matter is the question of what motivates a soldier to enlist in the US Military. As opposed to many other countries, like

Norway, the US does not have mandatory military service. The young men and women who fight in Afghanistan have all enlisted at one point or another. We have seen in this thesis that 9/11 proved to be a motivator, but what other factors are at play here?

Gender is another issue. It would have been interesting to get to interview a female US soldier about her experiences, but unfortunately I could not get in touch with one. How do female soldiers communicate with Afghans? What are the advantages/disadvantages of having female US soldiers in a male dominated society like the one in Afghanistan? Some female Marines have used head scarves to show respect. What reactions does this create in the US and in Afghanistan?

It could also be interesting to see how ISAF soldiers from other nations than the US got prepared for their mission. Did they have any kind of schooling on religion and culture? And did 9/11 work as a motivator to fight in Afghanistan for non-Americans as well?

How is the religious literacy in Afghanistan? Veterans I have interviewed have expressed that they know a great deal about Islam and know large parts of the Quran by heart. According to these veterans, some of the Afghans knew a lot about Christianity as well. One of the veterans stated that even though it was impressive that young boys knew so much about the Quran, it also saddened him that that was about all they knew; that was all they were taught in school.

There could be made many interesting research questions surrounding religious literacy. For example, how good are actually Norwegians in this field? How much do Norwegian high school graduates who have taken the “Religion, Ethics and Worldviews” subject taught in Norwegian public schools know about the world religions?

These are just a small selection of topics where further research would have been very interesting. For now, I am ending *this* research here, with the hope that you, the reader, and I will both have gained more insight about US soldiers’ pre-deployment schooling and their experience of Afghanistan, its religion and people.

Sources

I have chosen to divide the sources into “books”, “articles” and “online sources”. In the footnotes, books and articles are listed with the name of the author, while online sources have been listed with the name of the site/article since not all of these sources list their authors. All my sources have been written in Norwegian or English. All translations of quotes from Norwegian to English are my own.

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Appendix: Half structured interview guide for my Master's Thesis

Category 1: The veteran's social, religious and educational background

1. Where were you born? Where were your parents born? If they have immigrated to the US, why so?
2. Why did you join the US Army? Anything in particular made you decide?
3. Do you belong to a religious community? If yes: when did you join? Did the community support your choice of joining the army? If no: do you still consider yourself a religious person? Are your religious perspectives related to your choice of joining the US army?
4. What is your educational background? Finished High School?
5. College? Private school, public? Plans for more education after US army, in US army? Who in your family or community have supported your educational choices? Any obstacles to getting education that you want to mention?
6. Can you tell me a little more about your upbringing and how you used to live before joining the army?
7. What kind of ranking did you have in the Army, and where in Afghanistan were you based?

Category 2: Feelings about 9/11, knowledge about Afghanistan and Islam before the Army schooling

8. Where were you when 9/11 happened? What impact has it had on you personally?
9. What did you know about Afghanistan before the Army training?
10. What did you know about Islam before the Army training?

Category 3: The pre-deployment schooling in the Army

11. Can you describe to me in as much detail as you can remember the schooling or preparation you got in the Army when it comes to learning about religions and moral traditions in Afghanistan?

12. What did you think about this schooling? Did it seem thorough and useful at the time you went through it?
13. How long did the training last, and what topics were covered?
14. How did the training officers teach you about Islam? What kind of tone would you say the teacher applied, and do you remember any words used to label Islam? What is the most important you learnt from this training? How would you describe the Islam you learnt about in class, and how would you describe it when you met it at the ground? Do you have the same perspective/meanings as your teacher on Islam?

Category 4: The experiences the soldiers made in the field in Afghanistan

15. Please, tell me about your first meeting with the people in Afghanistan and how it felt to you. Did you observe any religious rituals there? How did you experience them? Where you invited to partake?
16. Do you think Afghan religious beliefs differ a lot from American? Do you think Afghan religious practices differ a lot from American?
17. How did you perceive the gender roles in the Afghan society? Do you think they are prescribed by culture or religion?
18. How do you think the Afghans perceived you and the other American soldiers present?
19. What kind of challenges did you encounter when communicating with the locals?
Apart from the obvious - the language...
20. Did you get a lot of help and support from your commanding officers in the field?
21. Did you experience any dangerous/scary/troublesome situations when interacting with the Afghans?
22. If yes on the last questions, do you think those situations could be resolved in another way had you known more about their religion?
23. Was there anything that your Army training really didn't prepare you for?
24. What was good about your training?
25. Is there anything that could be improved in the training? If so, do you have any suggestions on how that could be done?